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Feminist Perspectives on Liberation and Exploitation: A Phenomenological Study of Performance

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to my mother, who always encouraged a good education, my friends, who kept me sane, my grandparents who were always there for me, and to women everywhere who are still struggling to be free from violence.

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This paper describes the experiences of exploitation and liberation for neo burlesque performers using feminist theory as the context for analysis. The project had the following goals: to identify using phenomenology, the essence of new burlesque participant experiences, to analyze those experiences using feminist theories of exploitation and liberation regarding sex work, to compare burlesque to stripping, and to compare new burlesque to classic burlesque for understanding how burlesque is different today. To obtain these goals, participant observations were done of neo burlesque shows and neo burlesque performers agreed to an interview in which questions were asked that highlight their perceptions. The phenomenological aspect of the studies emphasizes their experiences of exploitation and liberation. There were specific experiences regarding the structure of participation that allowed for differences between stripping and burlesque, as well as perceptions that burlesque is an empowering medium of self-expression.

Keywords: burlesque, exploitation, liberation, empowerment, feminism, feminist theory, sex work.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970's, feminist discourse regarding sex work ranged from those who argue for censorship over pornography to those who see little exploitative nature in the sex industry. The positions examine the role exploitation play in the women's lives that engage in these forms of sex work primarily focusing on stripping, prostitution, and adult films. On the other hand, feminist research has also analyzed types of liberatory experiences many women claim to find in the sex industry.

Rubin (1984) suggests that sexuality has frequently been a vehicle for women's oppression, which is why it is of great importance to feminists (p. 301). Feminist research attempts to capture women's experiences to challenge patriarchal laws and culture that often permit sexual terror. Discourse on sexual expression argues about the degree of agency women have in their struggle over sexual politics within a patriarchal culture. For example, Vance (1984) states that "to focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experiences with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live" (1984:1). The perceptions of female burlesque performers inform feminist discourses on how agency can increase pleasure in the choices women make. Investigating new burlesque for elements of liberation and exploitation gives us information on women's experiences. Employing feminist theories may determine if neo burlesque is related to sex work by dissecting participants' views of burlesque and stripping and incorporating that with feminist definitions of sex work.

This is an exploratory project using a phenomenological analysis that describes the new burlesque phenomena while attempting to answer the following questions: using interviews and

participant observations, what is the type of experience new burlesque dancers have and does it contain liberating elements? Does new burlesque fit under the category of sex work? Is burlesque different from topless dancing or stripping? How does new burlesque differ from classic burlesque in ways that contribute to our understanding of it? The neo burlesque experience is described through the participants' points-of-view and analyzed using a phenomenological analysis. Their perceptions are situated in feminist theories on sex work in order to obtain feminist-defined elements of liberation and exploitation. New burlesque, which often contains striptease, is also compared to stripping and topless dancing to assess the differences and understand how burlesque may be related to sex work, utilizing a feminist definition of the sex industry.

A literature review first describing burlesque history demonstrates the context out of which such a performance emerged. Its status among social classes explains how burlesque was perceived and the ways in which it was used by performers to convey personal messages. Second and third wave feminist theories of sex work subsequently illustrate differing theories on sexual agency within a patriarchal culture to explain how liberation and exploitation are possible. Using feminist definitions of liberation and exploitation as well as theories of sexual agency, neo burlesque is examined to determine how it fits among the spectrum of feminist research. By placing importance on respondents' viewpoints, the phenomenological analysis of participant interviews informs feminist research on exploitation and liberation, showing how this relates to feminist theories of sex work.

HISTORICAL DISCUSSION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The Beginning of Classic Burlesque

An examination of burlesque history provides an understanding of the context in which classic burlesque occurred. The history also describes what classic burlesque was like, how it evolved and how various performers interpreted it. The social status of classic burlesque, the evolution of striptease, and the feminine representations contained in performances illustrates how burlesque changed and became what it is today.

Burlesque is a synonym for ridicule, satire, mockery, or farce. It existed as a type of theatrics that parodied classical theater long before nudity was incorporated into the performance. In this form, it "can be traced back to Aristophanes" (Fliotsos 2000:1). It was a satire that ridiculed social aspects of society such as classical education and the upper class. By 1840, London burlesque theaters presented classical mythological plays where women started dressing in skintight clothing to imitate Greek statues. This was the start of the "pornographic association" in early burlesque (Hall 1999).

In 1868, British actress Lydia Thompson and her troupe the British Blondes won the favor of New York audiences with their comedic performances often mocking the "classical male" (Baldwin 2004:1). Their costumes were suggestive for the time, including "skirts cut above the knee, their legs clad in pink tights" (Baldwin 2004:1). After becoming a success in New York, the group traveled across the United States and the wave of burlesque created by Thompson caught the attention of theaters nationwide. Subsequently, the dance craze that contributed to the popularization of burlesque was called the "hootchy kootchy," modeled after belly dancing from Asian cultures. This dance was first performed in the United States during the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 at the Colombian Exposition where the popular dancer Little Egypt became famous (Baldwin 2004:2-3).

Burlesque was joined with minstrelsy in the 1870s by Michael Leavitt who produced a mix resulting in a female minstrel show with male characters wearing blackface and burlesque dancers in blonde wigs. Minstrel shows were traditionally all male where white men with black painted faces caricatured African Americans. When the two were joined, the male performers were eliminated over time, as minstrel audiences preferred the female spectacle of burlesque. Some of the structure of the minstrel show endured in burlesque troupes, however, such as the variety acts and the endings based in absurdity. Nonetheless, burlesque's rise in popularity by the 1900's signaled the decline of the minstrel performances.

Early burlesque was entertainment largely enjoyed by the middle and upper classes. According to Hall (1999), burlesque theatrics "transcended class barriers" because performances often contained working to upper class people though audiences varied at different points in history. As burlesque came to increasingly symbolize obscenity in the 1920's, shows were relegated to working class theaters and eventually nightclubs.

The Advent of Striptease

The concept of striptease was born in 1917 in a Minsky brothers' burlesque theater. (Baldwin 2004:8). As Mae Dix was leaving the stage from her performance, the audience was ecstatic when they caught a glimpse of her removing the collar from her shirt with the intentions of keeping it clean. After coming back on stage she proceeded to remove her cuffs and, as Morton Minsky stated "lost her head [and] went back for a short chorus and unbuttoned her bodice" (Baldwin 2004:8). Soon Dix was creating pieces where she let the audience rip off parts of a newspaper she was reading until there was little left to cover her. Baldwin (2004) refers to these and other moments as the "accidental stripper," another of which happened with Hinda Wassau. When Wassau failed to remove her outer costume because of a stuck zipper, her

manager pushed her back on stage where she "shimmied" out of the original costume to reveal her beaded ensemble underneath (Baldwin 2004:9).

In the 1920s Carrie Finnell was performing striptease by promising to remove a new article of clothing every week. By this time, striptease became a major feature of burlesque while comedians and variety acts remained as filler for the rest of the show (Baldwin 2004:9). By the 1930s striptease was so popular that promoters began hiring women with props and costumes to edge out competition. Allen, author of *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture (1991),* suggests that with the advent of the striptease, burlesque was used for the patriarchal management of "female subordination" as the shows were usually produced by men and in male owned theaters. Thus, women's bodies became the objects of male humor in order to control unbridled female sexuality, "a show between silent female sexual display and verbal, male dominated humor" (1991:272).

With the fame of the Minsky brothers', the 1920s and 1930s became the golden age of burlesque. Their burlesque shows effectively put an end to the censorship instated by Sam Scribner in the 1900s. Scribner, who controlled major burlesque venues, had conservative leanings which led to the suppression of all sexual references. When the Minsky brothers moved their burlesque performances to working class theaters, offering inexpensive tickets and repetitive acts during slow summer months they were able to gain leverage over Scribner's power, forcing him to end censorship or risk losing his remaining audience (Baldwin 2004:7-10).

The Minsky brothers' ownership of burlesque houses all over New York city coupled with the Depression putting many theaters out of business, allowed the brothers to take control of a theater in the Times Square district, sending burlesque to Broadway. However, in 1937 Mayor LaGuardia, displeased with the growing lewdness of burlesque, successfully transferred all

performances to nightclubs when he refused to renew licenses to theaters in New York City that allowed burlesque.

Early Burlesque in Feminist Discourse

Classic burlesque femininity. Understanding classic burlesque femininity gives a picture of how performers were viewed by the audience as well as how neo burlesque is different. Feminine representations are an important part of burlesque history because of how femininity affected the status of burlesque performers. Examining some of these feminine expressions shows a picture of what feminine standards were acceptable in performances, particularly when looking at the audiences' reactions. Burlesque was the first form of theater to express feminine sexuality with fewer restrictions. It invoked feelings of horror because people feared what they saw as unfettered feminine sexual expression (Allen 1991:137). Various types of femininity were expressed on stage by performers, yet burlesque did contain a preferred beauty standard, as evidenced by the marginalization of women like Sophie Tucker and Eva Tanguay who, although they still performed, were viewed as "old and overweight and since audiences did not find them physically attractive, their aggressive sexuality wasn't threatening," (Baldwin 2004:4).

After being forced to lower class venues in 1937, burlesque became a profit-driven medium where male comedians were given the majority of speaking parts and female dancers played "ditzy broads or vile vixens," pandering to a majority of male costumers (Allen 2002:159-60). As the controversy over burlesque continued, the women's status was equated to that of prostitutes because of their blatant sexuality and lower class standing. When seen from an inferior status and subsequently defined as the "other," the burlesque dancer could be absorbed by bourgeois culture, as she was no longer a threat to their values. The move of burlesque to working class neighborhoods and audiences stemmed from the combination of

obscenity and the sexual threat that it came to represent, which ceased to be a novelty form of entertainment for the upper class (Allen 2002:159-60).

In the 1940s women such as Gypsy Lee Rose, Georgia Sothern, Faith Bacon, and Sally Rand formed their own companies and burlesque continued in popularity well into the 1960s. With the sixties came the precursor of modern stripping, the go-go club, where women "dance on stages or in cages" (Baldwin 2004:13). This led to the development of gentlemen's clubs and the proliferation of sexually suggestive "mass-produced strippers" (Baldwin 2004:13). At this time, the pornography industry was gaining momentum as well, all of which brought about the death of classic burlesque. Until the early 1990s older performers like Ann Corrio and Tempest Storm offered nostalgic glimpse of classic burlesque. However, modern day stripping no longer combines striptease with a variety style of entertainment including live music, singing, and choreographed dancing (Baldwin 2004:14).

More evidence that burlesque performers were pressured to fit a particular standard of beauty and sexuality is contained in the story of the Cherry Sisters. Pittenger described the performance of The Cherry Sisters as a kind of "failed femininity" with the sisters' middle-aged looks, spinsterhood, and conservative morals (2004:73). The sisters, who started performing burlesque in the 1890s, expressed a mockery of sexualized femininity, eliciting harsh criticism from their audiences and critics. A newspaper review of their first performance caused Addie Cherry to sue for libel.

The Cherry Sisters started performing together to earn money for the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. After making $100 they performed more frequently, as this brought in more money in a much shorter time than farm work. The sisters showcased a variety act where Ella's expression of femininity was anything but conventional. Dressed in blackface and male drag,

Ella performed a song called "Old Sam Patch" and Jessie sang "Why Did They Dig Ma's Grave So Deep?" Their blatant disregard for accepted feminine standards and sexualized performances in burlesque shocked and angered audiences, but it also made them famous. Following their second act a news article stated:

> They couldn't sing, speak, or act…Possibly the most ridiculous thing of the entire performance was an essay – think of it – an essay – read by one of the poor girls… [N]othing could drive [the Cherry Sisters] away and no combination of yells, whistles, barks, and howls could subdue them…Cigars, cigarettes, rubbers, everything was throw at them, yet they stood there awkwardly bowing their acknowledgements and singing on. (Pittenger 2004:75).

After attempting to sue another newspaper for libel following a Cedar Rapids performance, their lawyer suggested they hold a mock trial at the same opera house as part of an encore performance. Their innocent persona in the media and that they supposedly took their lawyer's advice is evidence that the Cherry Sisters figured out that the publicity, good or bad, had monetary benefits (Pittenger 2004:75-76). The mock trial crowded the seats of the Cedar Rapids opera house.

Several lawsuits ensued, along with their antagonistic relationship with the media, suggesting the Cherry Sisters were not the ignorant women their critics claimed. The sisters' publicity stunts drew often large audiences, and they became known as "the worst act in show business" (Pittenger 2004:76). Their visit to Dubuque consequently became a violent riot that was apparently prearranged. Pittenger (2004) claims:

> The riot was expected and premeditated. A Bellevue newspaper offered the opinion, 'The newspapers told in advance of what latitude was to be allowed, the theatre manager sanctioned it, and the police laughed at it.' This is supported by a report that the theatre manager took the precaution of replacing the stage curtain with an old one that was 'a misfit for the proscenium, leaving open spaces on either side.' Additionally, the audience came equipped with seltzer siphons, fire extinguishers, and a large wash boiler. The Cherry Sisters were violently assaulted and repeatedly driven from the stage. The usual fruits and vegetables, eggs, and tin cans soon gave way to seltzer spray, forceful discharges from fire extinguishers aimed at their faces, and large missiles, including the washtub that was thrown from the balcony and aimed directly at the women. When one of the 'eldest sisters,' presumably Effie, was driven from the

stage, she returned with 'a shotgun and a defiant look' that created a momentary pause in the rowdy behavior. However, the performance was terminated shortly thereafter without gunfire and the crowd followed the Cherry Sisters into the street, where the men pelted them with rocks, sticks, and eggs until they reached the safety of their hotel. (P. 76-77.)

The Cherry Sisters continued to perform into the 1930s with acts that involved temperance and moral essays, self-deprecation, and Christian songs. One performance included the sisters draping themselves with American flags and Jessie suspending herself from a crucifix while singing "Clinging to the Cross." Pittenger argues that these performances along with their failed femininity, which lacked sexiness, gracefulness, and compliance was what made them so popular (2004:87). They wore homemade dresses that fully covered their bodies and seldom wore make-up. In the words of Pittenger, "they burlesqued burlesque" (2004:87).

Part of the sisters' appeal was their timing. In the 1890s male authority was being questioned on a large scale by early feminists (often called New Women), causing a lot of young men to be "confused" and "angry" (Pittenger 2004:79). The Cherry Sisters became an outlet for male frustrations.

In post World War II burlesque films, femininity parodies conventional standards by use of exaggeration. Schaefer (1997) states that burlesque films were considered obscene, which he defines as an "excess" of something, suggesting that burlesque was viewed as feminine excess, with its "aggressive eroticism." Using Friedan's analysis of postwar ideology, he maintains that burlesque sexuality defied conventional standards for women of the time, who were socialized to believe that satisfaction could only be found in "sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing love" (1997:52).

The burlesque striptease of post World War II was a gendered display of unconfined femininity. Once the articles of clothing were removed, the stripper was then "degendered," and the audience left with nudity and an unstable gender identity (Schaefer 1997:55-56). In other

words, her lack of clothing was symbolic of removing her gender role. According to Schaefer (1997), the obscenity of the striptease came from opposing social norms regarding acceptable femininity, which was how the stripper became a source of enjoyment as well as repugnance, confusing and threatening moral stability.

Other representations of femininity included cross-dressing or drag for both men and women which were not uncommon in classic burlesque. The Cherry Sisters, along with other dancers, frequently cross-dressed to ridicule masculine roles. In the films *Varietease* and *Teaserama*, a drag character named Vicky Lynn performs as a convincing female performer who was "presented with the same degree of sensuality and tease as strips by women" (Schaefer 1997:57-58).

As demonstrated, classic burlesque contained various representations of femininity, some which were more accepted by the audience than others, which effected performers' status. These feminine expressions are evidence that some aspects of classic burlesque performance challenged gender identity and roles. In the May 1869 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, burlesque entertainers were criticized as lacking morality because of their open sexuality, gender bending, and use of blackface minstrels (Winkiel 2004). Burlesque worked within "transgression and inversion" yet it neither fully resisted nor was it fully controlled by cultural demands (Allen 1991:289). Allen suggests that this complexity is important for understanding hierarchical relationships between race, class, and gender in America because this helps us comprehend how "we construct meaning and how we are constructed by it" (1991:289).

Burlesque and first wave feminists. Knowing that burlesque, to some degree, challenged feminine standards it is important to see if a connection existed between burlesque performers and early feminists who were active in transforming roles for women. First wave feminists

borrowed from burlesque to reform images of women through cross-dressing and lampooning melodramatic roles in theater. Like burlesque women, suffragists were often portrayed as sexual monstrosities in the media. Both had in common the desire to reform women's roles, consequently receiving negative criticism.

A connection between burlesque and first wave feminism is evident in Robin's play *Votes for Women!*, later published as a book called *The Convert*. Using the burlesque technique, parody of melodramatic femininity, to widen the theatrical roles for women, Robin's book was a commercial success that pushed the issue of women's right to vote to the forefront of British society. According to Winkiel (2004), English burlesque satirized the conventions of literary melodrama that contained traditional female roles by using "transvestite roles for women" and pieces where upper class, powerful men are taken advantage of by openly sexual working class performers.

However, Olivia Logan, a New Woman who protested indecency in theater, saw burlesque as a threat to the morals of the middle class (Rodger 2004:395). Logan viewed the working class male audience as incapable of being corrupted by burlesque performers because of their inferior status. Her views show that burlesque was controversial even though elements of it were borrowed for theatrical and activist purposes like Robin's *Votes for Women!*.

The history of classic burlesque and its connection to first wave feminism provides a picture of its beginnings. However, the lack of research on exploitation and liberation for burlesque performers warrants the use of feminist research on sex work. This discourse provides an analytical framework in which to theorize about neo burlesque performers' experiences of exploitation and liberation through feminist perspectives. Second and third wave theories on sex work are compared to determine which best applies to modern burlesque. Further, neo burlesque

contains a form of striptease that eventually evolved into go-go clubs, leading to modern day stripping and topless dancing (Baldwin 2004:13). Since stripping and topless dancing are considered forms of sex work in some feminist theories (Rubin 1984; Sloan and Wahab 2004), looking at this research will help determine if neo burlesque fits into the category of sex work. Feminist discourse on sex work will also provide a framework in which to analyze exploitation and liberation in neo burlesque.

Second Wave Feminism and Sex Work

Examining feminist research of sex work provides for a comparison of the definition of sex work and how neo burlesque is related. Contained in sex work research are ways of looking at what exploitation and liberation are and what conditions are necessary for each to occur. Applying these concepts to new burlesque expands knowledge of how liberation can be obtained or how it is limited. For instance, in looking at neo burlesque, does exploitation or sexualized violence exist to the same degree as found in pornography? Also, the lack of research on neo burlesque warrants the use of feminist theories to analytically interpret the context of performers in feminist discourse. Positions on sexual expression from second and third wave feminism can contribute to our understanding. Specifically, in the search for elements of liberation and exploitation in new burlesque, feminist theories are useful for defining those concepts and investigating how they occur.

Feminist views on sex work from the second wave differ from those who were anti-pornography and sex work to those who were supportive of sex work, with some advocating the transformation of pornography. Anti-pornography research theorizes that pornography is violence or sexual domination over women (Fraiman 1995:744). The problems with adult films exist in the representation of women and their bodies in submissive roles and frequently include

violent sex acts and testimonials of women who were forced into the industry. Prostitution, pornography, rape, and assault are viewed equally as sexual dangers. To end sexual exploitation, some anti-pornography theorists advocate employing legal outlets to establish censorship.

Dworkin (1994) maintains that pornography is "rape and gang rape and anal rape and throat rape: and it is woman raped, asking for more… it is power men have over women turned into sexual acts men do to women, because pornography is the power and the act… it sexualizes inequality and in doing so creates discrimination as a sex-based practice" (p. 26). In her Human Rights Ordinance written with MacKinnon pornography is defined as "graphic sexually explicit subordination of women whether in pictures or words" (1994:29). Dworkin states that ending pornography is not censorship because those who make pornography are "instruments of terror, not its victims (1994:28). To end the making of these films would end some of the sexual dangers for women.

Critics of Dworkin's definition of pornography state that it lacks an analysis of the numerous genres of pornography, the experiences of women involved in the industry, and the context of those experiences (Vance 1984). Further, critics note that Dworkin does not address the perspectives of women who claim positive experiences from the sex industry and claim a degree of personal agency in pornography.

MacKinnon (1983) proposes that the obscenity standard and pornography are built on patriarchal bias. Obscenity laws permit gender-based inequality to exist in pornography, and are the representation of how men view women as objects to be dominated. Free speech laws also contain male bias, systematically censoring female free speech. Until obscenity laws are transformed, pornography will continue to be "a form of forced sex" and define sexual reality (1983:171).

For Mackinnon (1983) and Dworkin (1994), pornography is patriarchal sexual reality created through adult films, which cannot be reconfigured and separated from eroticism precisely because it has become reality (MacKinnon 1983:172 and Dworkin 1994). Because eroticism is laden with sexual hegemony, male supremacy must be undermined for eroticism to become empowering. Pornography and eroticism, according to MacKinnon (1983), are inextricably linked. Though resistance and transformation of sex work is possible, it is ultimately constrained under patriarchal limitations. However, Mackinnon and Dworkin do not elaborate on an analysis that could enlighten feminist research on how transformation of pornography is possible.

Collins (1991) poses a different view of sex work. She investigated how pornography is rooted in "the rape of enslaved African American women." She states that sex work such as pornography and prostitution are mediums for sexual violence. Collins found five similarities to pornography and the rape of African American women during slavery. First, black women are portrayed as breeders for white men. Second, a breeder is likened to an animal because she can be bred by force (p. 167).

Third, sexuality and violence are also characteristics Collins found linked. Sexual violence allows for female passivity, as their will to resist is stolen. Fourth, enslaved black women were raped by white men for profit, which is similar to how the pornography industry profits from the sexual exploitation of African American women today. Lastly, the forced breeding of black women so that they will look similar to whites was further evidence showing that pornography is rooted in racism (p. 167). Collins (1991) contends that the themes of "passivity, objectification, and malleability to male control" have been passed down since the time of slavery (p. 167).

For Collins, pornography symbolizes a reality based on the historical context of those who create it. Thus it is entrenched with slave-like relationships that reinforce racism. For instance, African American women are usually shown in bondage and in submissive roles, which is different from how white women and Asian women are portrayed. These differing images support her theory that pornography signifies relations of oppression based on race and ethnicity (p. 170-171).

The experiences of African American women challenge feminist theories that racism was added to adult films. "Pornography emerged within a specific system of social class relationships," that started with the exploitation of black women and later included white women (Collins 1991:170). Because of the social standing of white women, they have been depicted as objects and black women as animals. Collins (1991) suggests analyzing race, class, and gender relationships within pornographic images, which can be used to raise social awareness and empower African American women. Collins agrees with Mackinnon and Dworkin in that sexual exploitation will only be removed when white male supremacy no longer exists. However, she does not offer a critique on black women's experiences in adult films. To expand on their perspectives would inform theories of racism in pornography and allow for differing accounts of how black women experience the industry.

bell hooks (1984) cautions people not to see the sexual exploitation of black women as occurring solely inside the context of slavery. The sexual domination of African American women did not end with slavery. Instead, hooks (1984) states that whites deliberately and systematically guaranteed black women were subordinated in social status through pervasive myths of African American women as sexually loose prostitutes regardless of their

achievements. These underlying attitudes exist in Jim Crow laws that purposefully institutionalized separation of the races to enforce social control (hooks 1984:52-60).

There are multiple theories on how sex work is exploitative to women based on race, class, and other factors. Second wave anti-sex work research contains a spectrum of positions from those who advocate for the abolishment of sex work to those who claim sex work can be transformed to include libertory experiences. However, women's experiences in the sex industry are sometimes excluded. Investigating burlesque performers can inform anti-sex work research about the role agency plays in sex work when personal experiences are ignored.

Pro-sex feminist theories of the second wave. Pro-sex feminism, also called anti-censorship feminists, captures the other side of sex work discourse (Fraiman 1995:745). Vance and Snitow (1984) argue that pro-sex labels are insufficient for describing the various positions of feminists on sex work (p. 127). Research from pro-sex feminist theories opposes violent pornography but fear censorship of it could harm educational materials that promote sexual issues and awareness (Fraiman 1995:745). Sexual agency is a key factor advanced by these theorists. Although pornography is not defended, pro-sex feminists often claim that not all sex workers are forced into the industry. Further, they discredit the idea that sadomasochism (S/M) socializes women to be submissive "and that images of female body parts necessarily reduce women to these parts" (Fraiman 1995:745). In addition, Loe (1999) claims that "pro-sex feminists" in the 1980s thought that what was missing from the feminist movement was a space where women could educate themselves and mold their sexual desires, becoming "sexual subjects" rather than objects (Loe 1999:710, citing Vance 1984:7).

Vance and Snitow (1984) assert that the anti-pornography movement is conceptually flawed where it fails to differentiate between "violent pornography and pornography, between

pornography and sex, and between sex and violence" to denote diverse experiences (p. 129). They contend that viewing adult films through a narrow definition renders the array of other genres silent and reduces sexual expression to pornography. Women's "sexual situation" with pornography constitutes a minute section of sexuality (Vance and Snitow 1984:130). Adult films do not tell the entire story of how women are sexually enlightened or socialized. Women obtain information from sexual encounters, culture, ideology, the media, politics, etc. Instead of the sex industry being the sole determiner of meaning, these experiences offer a broader analysis of sexual expression (Vance and Snitow 1984). Vance and Snitow (1984) argue that it is important not to consign sexuality to pornography because it will be viewed as violence. Recognizing that differing influences contribute to the understanding of sexual experiences and socialization help feminists strive for reforms that permit men and women to ascribe to sexuality less constrained by gender roles. Vance and Snitow (1984) advocate conceiving of sexuality from different perspectives to make reforms in the sex industry but do not theorize how women's liberating experiences could be affected by patriarchal hegemony. Although it is productive to recognize liberating forms of sexual expression, feminists cannot forget the social and psychological effects of sexual terror in patriarchal domination.

Lorde (1978) wrote that for a system of oppression to sustain itself, it must have control over resources that can be liberating, which is why the erotic has been manipulated to serve the needs of the power structure. Because eroticism has been used against women in sexual violence, Lorde states that it is easy to conclude that the erotic should be silenced (p. 569). However, Lorde distinguishes eroticism from pornography, maintaining that pornography exists as "sensation without feeling, denying how the erotic can be used to empower and inform

women" (p. 570). Furthermore, the erotic is a sense of gratification that can be powerful and fulfilling and should be something feminists strive for.

Lorde reminds us that erotic means "the personification of love," which was derived from the root word eros in the Greek language (p. 571). While pornography is superficial sensation, eroticism joins together the spiritual and political because it comes out of love; it is "the embodiment of our deepest feelings" (Lorde 1978:571-572). Eroticism empowers through a focus on intimate feelings, allowing for the experience of the self. It does not simply concentrate on the sexual, but rather the sensual, conveying a joy that can empower women's lives (Lorde 1978:572). Exchanging pornographic representations for eroticism is a way to empower women by acknowledging their desires and feelings while pornography is "the abuse of feeling" (Lorde 1978:574). However, Lorde does not formulate concrete ways in which her definition of eroticism can be applied in everyday life, which would offer a clearer understanding of how the erotic can transform pornography.

Though pro-sex work research has attempted to include women's experiences some theorists fail to consider the weight of patriarchal hegemony, ignoring the dangers women face even when agency is employed to shape situations. However, pro-sex feminist theories show that agency is possible in sex work and demonstrate additional ways liberation happens, which is useful for understanding the burlesque experience. Third wave feminism offers yet another approach to sex work and sexual expression. The research often examines forms of sexual expression that can be liberating for feminists, which is why it is helpful for analyzing new burlesque. Third wave feminist positions on sex work are presented in the next section to demonstrate how the discourse is different from second wave research. Also, the desire of third

wave feminism to find liberatory forms of sexual expression leaves room for seeing neo burlesque as a possibly liberating experience.

Third Wave Feminism and Sex Work

Third wave feminism informs the understanding of neo burlesque because of similar elements in both, which is why a look at third wave views of sex work is necessary. Also, third wave feminist views of sex work accept that it could be an empowering experience rather than consigning sex worker perspectives to patriarchal hegemony.

Third wave feminism constitutes critiques of the second wave while integrating feminist philosophies, seeking to negotiation contradictions that evolved from the second wave and the lived experiences of third generation feminists (Heywood and Drake 1997:8). Siegel (1997:60) cautioned third wave feminists not to criticize second wave feminist theories as "monolithically constructed" in ways that they become the "bad mother," believing this would only lead to a halt in productive conversation among feminists. However, it is useful to examine second and third wave theories on sex work to see how those differ and inform the understanding of neo burlesque.

Marinucci (2005:505) argues that there is a correlation between third wave feminist theories and Generation X, which is often considered the generation born between 1961 and 1981 or 1965 and 1975. Those characteristics associated with Generation X are irony, self-mockery, satire, camp, and cynicism with postmodernist and retro affinities (Marinucci, 2005:505). Marinucci attributes burlesque's comeback to Generation X and third wave feminist attitudes because of the parallels of camp, retro, and self-mockery. Third wave feminism refuses to find contradictions in sporting snugly fitting t-shirts adorned with labels like "Porn Star," "Breeder," "Bitch," and "Bust" as expressions of a well-developed feminist consciousness. This

is a feminism that can criticize the "objectification of women by men in one breath, while embracing the notion of feminist porn in the next" (Marinucci, 2005: 521).

Third wave feminism takes a different stance on pornography from the views of the second wave. Pornography is often viewed through an amused eye with women being capable of enjoying it (Marinucci, 2005: 521). From the anti-pornography stance to those feminists who consider its censorship a potential threat to free speech, Marinucci argues that women's personal experiences of pornography are frequently ignored. The positions that associate pornography with patriarchal domination fail to contemplate whether censorship of it would be more dangerous than allowing it (Marinucci, 2005: 521). Third wave feminists characteristically have a tolerant outlook on sex work, with a vision toward transforming and re-figuring sexual expression beyond its patriarchal boundaries.

Walker (1995) stated:

> Curiosity about pornography, attraction to a stable, domestic partnership, a desire to start a business and pursue traditional individual power, interest in the world of S/M, a love for people who challenged and sometimes flatly opposed my feminist beliefs… for me and my sense of how to make a feminist revolution, they represented contradictions I had no idea how to reconcile. (P. xxxii)

Walker (1995) stresses that feminism has become too "compartmentalized," having a potential for rigid expectations (p. xxxii). She states that we must strive to be accepting of those who do not fit a mold so that we will not be "pitted against someone" (p. xxxii-xxxiv). Limitations on desires, sexuality, and identity cause the movement to have unrealistic standards.

The current generation of feminists faces the incongruities of the "ways in which we are compelled and constructed by the very things that undermine us" (Heywood and Drake 1997:8). The third wave challenges feminists to negotiate discrepancies between how we are knowingly socialized by dominant culture which can result in particular desires, and how those desires can

fit into feminist consciousness. Heywood and Drake (1997) contend that desires cannot be meaningfully analyzed if contemplated in isolation. However, feminism has limits on ideas or desires that serve to destabilize its goals and meaning. Researchers can contribute to feminist positions and provide evidence of women's experiences that will expand definitions of feminism, such as looking at neo burlesque performance and searching for liberating aspects that will inform feminist theory. Examining women's experiences of sexual expression can provide useful theories on liberation, exploitation, and sex work. Third wave feminism leaves room for the desire to engage in sex work as not only acceptable, but also something that can be liberating and fun. It examines sexual expression from a more tolerant standpoint and emphasizes women's experiences as an important element.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Creswell (1998) states that in feminist research "gender domination" exists within a "patriarchal context," which is the premise used for this study (p.83). Therefore, feminist goals are also used, which Creswell claims are "to establish collaborative and nonexploitative relationships, to place the researcher within the study so as to avoid objectification, and to conduct research that is transformative" (p. 83).

Feminist theories of sex work from the second and third generation of feminist research are the theoretical framework for this study. The discourse on sex work from a feminist approach allows for an investigation of how liberation is possible for women engaging in burlesque as well as how performers are exploited. Sex work is liberating to the extent that particular conditions are met, which include specifically class and education. For example, a sex worker that comes from a lower class and has little education has a lesser chance of being able to leave the industry if she feels it has become something harmful. Also, sex work is more

liberating depending on the type of work involved. Stripping or topless dancing could be less exploitative than prostitution because of the dangerous environments often associated with prostitution (e.g. working alone with a stranger on the street at night). However, sex work is ultimately limited in that sexism and patriarchal domination still exist. Women can exert control over sex work, which helps it become liberating, but the control is limited in that it cannot fully eliminate sexual terror and danger.

Rubin (1984) conceptualizes a "radical theory of sexual politics" that was largely influenced by Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (p. 267). Foucault proposed a social constructionist perspective on sex that situates sexual desires as socially and historically contingent, rather than biologically essential (Rubin 1984:275). Central to Rubin's theory is the idea that everything varies, from "biological organisms to the most complex human social formations" (1984:283). This is why, when theorizing about sexual expression and sex work, variation should be considered. Variation is the foundation for Rubin's pluralistic sexual concept.

Rubin defines sex work as prostitution, pornography models, strippers, phone sex operators, and generally those associated with the sex industry. While she recognizes the sex industry as potentially exploitative, she argues that it is an extension of the sexism already in society. Rubin advocates targeting exploitative areas of sex work rather than censoring the industry. She substantiates her radical pluralist sexual theory through analyzing the limits of feminist theory, stating that feminism can benefit from "theoretical and sexual pluralism," especially when understanding the realm of sexuality (Rubin 1984:301). She contends that the anti-pornography movement has "condemned virtually every variant of sexual expression as anti-feminist" (Rubin 1984:301). To do this is to reduce the movement to a singular theory. She

asserts that they use the poorest examples as "representative" without acknowledging that the examples represent a segment of women's experiences with the sex industry.

Research such as Sloan and Wahab's account for the contexts where women came to sex work and had liberating experiences. Sloan and Wahab (2004) researched conditions that influence women's experiences in sex work. Their work demonstrates what circumstances allow for sex work to be viewed as a positive experience. They define sex work as "work [that] includes many types of situations in which compensation is exchanged for some kind of sexual activity, including legal activities that do not involve person-to-person contact (telephone sex), legal activities that involve person-to-person contact (such as lap dancing, stripping, topless dancing) and illegal forms of sex work where there is intimate person-to-person client contact (such as sexual massage, sexual nude modeling, and all other forms of prostitution). They researched thirty women who worked as topless dancers. Their investigation demonstrates the need for more than the duality of exploitation and liberation when rethinking sexual expression. They contend that dichotomous thinking is constraining to research on sex work because it does not capture the complexities of women's lives who are engaged in sexual professions and entertainment.

According to Sloan and Wahab (2004), topless dancing is the progression of other forms of sexually provocative dancing that began with burlesque, transformed into go-go dancing, and ultimately became stripping. They analyzed the life circumstances of topless dancers and discovered women became topless dancers for many reasons (p. 21). One reason was for financial gain in a structure that provided the opportunity and economic benefits. Some women started as a dare or when they were highly intoxicated. Other respondents came into topless dancing by finding out about it through friends.

Sloan and Wahab established four categories describing women who were involved in topless dancing: non-conformists, workers, survivors, and dancers. Non-conformists are mostly "hippies or rebels" who are college educated, white, and middle class. They are women who have the resources to come into topless dancing and leave when they desire (Sloan and Wahab 2004:26-27).

The workers category contained women who were working class, using topless dancing as a means of income, with nearly all of them being white or Latina. They were not college-educated and began dancing on average only a couple of years after high school graduation, slightly earlier than the non-conformists. Survivors were women who entered topless dancing mostly as teenagers and were victims of child abuse. A large amount of these women had no work experience prior to dancing and were likely to remain a dancer. All of the women in this category were white and none had college degrees with education levels ranging from ninth grade to two years of college. The last category, the dancers, included women who had professional dance training. The dancers' education ranged from high school diplomas to completion of college, with most having college degrees. They were likely to leave topless dancing when they were burned out. This was the most diverse group, consisting of white, Latina, and African American women (Sloan and Wahab 2004 p. 26-27).

Resources such as education and finances were linked to how respondents felt about sex work. If the work could be escaped because of accessible resources and the participant was equipped with an education background to see the work through a critical eye, they reported feeling less constrained by topless dancing. Survivors had the least resources and although they did not view the work as positive or fun, they also did not claim to be victimized and demonstrated an understanding of the power imbalances between men and women. They felt

they negotiated ways around power-based inequalities "to beat men at their own game" (Sloan and Wahab 2004:39). Non-conformists, unlike survivors, had the resources to gain any benefits from topless dancing and leave the industry if it became harmful. Sloan and Wahab (2004) concluded that agency is crucial sexual liberation because it allows women to make choices, shaping what their experience will become.

Sloan and Wahab's (2004) findings reveal that survivors' experiences support theories from second wave anti-pornography feminist theories. Non-conformists demonstrated the view that sex work could be liberating when the worker has the available resources to leave when desired, supporting Vance and Snitow's stance that sex work can be viewed through different lenses to obtain varying meanings.

Sloan and Wahab concluded that Rubin's "radical sexual pluralist theory," which grew out of "sexology, gay liberation, and social construction theory," is advantageous when examining sex work because it avoids the establishment of "grand theories" (2004:39). Their research establishes the importance of acknowledging women's interpretations of their experiences in sexual expression. Women's experiences can help researchers find where their knowledge fits in second and third wave theories on sex work, as well as how these understandings can bridge inconsistencies and expand feminist theories. Many women in Sloan and Wahab's study dismissed totalizing feminist perspectives that labeled them as victims. Sloan and Wahab assert that it is crucial to recognize women in sex work as "experts" in their profession (2004:25).

From an historical perspective, classic burlesque was examined in the context of the first wave feminism and the discourse on sex work from second and third generation feminists. Though it is impossible to accurately represent each of the feminist theories on the sex industry, I

attempt to illuminate the positions of each faction, such as those advocating for the transformation of pornography. However, Rubin's (1984) and Sloan and Wahab's work are central to the analysis of neo burlesque. Specifically, radical sexual pluralist theory accounts for the varying experiences neo burlesque women share in sexual expression. Their contexts, or life circumstances, permit them to come to burlesque as a hobby and enjoy it, much like the non-conformists in Sloan and Wahab's (2004) study.

Using Sloan and Wahab (2004) and Rubin's (1984) research as the primary theories for this work, this study is an exploratory project that asks: what are the experiences of exploitation and liberation for neo burlesque performers? In the context of feminist discourse as well as participant perspectives, does neo burlesque fall under the category of sex work?

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Data, Methods and Analytical Framework

In October 2004 while volunteering at a John Kerry fundraiser I was able to gain access to the burlesque performers, who allowed me entrance into a rehearsal to set up interviews. Comprising the data set are ten non-participant observations of performances and ten individual interviews plus feminist theories on sex work, exploitation and liberation, and an examination of burlesque history. The participants were all interviewed one time, with interviews ranging from 45 minutes to an hour and a half. I transcribed the interviews leaving out identifying factor of interviewees and then analyzed according to the phenomenological method. Informants are all burlesque performers who have extensive, first-hand knowledge of burlesque, which is important in a phenomenological study. Because burlesque is the phenomenon being investigated, the participants' lived experiences of it are central to the study.

Using feminist investigation on sex work as the framework for this study, neo burlesque performers were interviewed to establish how their experiences related to feminist notions of exploitation and liberation. Phenomenological methods of inquiry were used to determine the meanings burlesque dancers give their experiences.

The goals of this research, using feminist inquiry, is to establish ways in which liberation and exploitation exist in burlesque and to expand feminist theories of sex work with a primary focus on burlesque performers' experiences. Focusing on their perceptions, I search for what has been left out of feminist research in order to extend current knowledge of women's experiences of liberation and exploitation. Creswell (1998, citing Stewart 1994) states that it is important that researchers assess what has been left out of social sciences research on women's lives and how they "struggle with their social devaluation and powerlessness" (p. 84). In assessing burlesque performers' perceptions, I use a feminist lens to investigate the concepts of exploitation and liberation and how these things relate to feminist theories of sex work.

To incorporate participants' voices, a qualitative study was used, which is a form of study that assumes reality is subjective as the researcher interacts with the environment, making bias inevitable (Creswell 1994:5). Creswell (1998:9), citing Agger (1991) suggests that qualitative studies are useful for "democratizing science," because they can be read and written in ways that are "less technical."

In the qualitative tradition researchers ordinarily conduct studies in a natural setting where inductive analysis is utilized for the data gathered (Creswell 1998:14). The meanings collected from interviewees' experiences and participant observations demonstrate the "multi-method" and "interpretive" aspects of this tradition. Using Creswell's "complex holistic"

approach, burlesque history, performers' experiences, and feminist perspectives on sex work set the stage for analysis of neo-burlesque (1998:14-15).

As there is scarce prior research on new burlesque, a qualitative study proved useful for investigating this topic. Creswell stresses qualitative studies should be exercised when "variables cannot easily be identified, theories are not available to explain the behavior of participants or their population of study and theories need to be developed" (1998:14-15). After collecting meanings of participant experiences, groups and categories of the phenomenon were established in the qualitative tradition.

Phenomenology was employed to discover the essence of burlesque dancers' experiences. Experience becomes an important factor in categorization because the performers focused almost entirely on their personal understanding of burlesque, which allows for highlighting this understanding according to the phenomenological method. One of the steps of analysis in phenomenology is to "extract significant statements from each description, analyze their meanings, and group them into themes," which leads to a descriptive narrative of lived experiences (Creswell 1998:32-33).

Social phenomenology examines the essence subjects give to social acts (Creswell 1998:15). In this text I underscore burlesque as a social act in which performers experience it through the meanings they ascribe to it, which is viewed through a feminist lens for social implications. However, since so little research has been written on burlesque dancers' perceptions it is important to recognize that their experiences may exist beyond the scope of current theoretical knowledge. For help with this, neo burlesque is examined in the context of sex work and feminist concepts of sexual exploitation.

A major concept of phenomenology is that of epoch, which came from transcendental phenomenology and involves the researcher identifying biases or assumptions about the social act being explored in order to understand it from the participants' point of view (Creswell 1998:52). An example of a theoretical stance that has the potential to bias findings is my views that sexual expression is bound by forms of exploitation in patriarchal culture, allowing for exploitation to somehow become inevitable. As phenomenology involves asking interview questions that illuminate a subject's experience, burlesque dancers were asked a variety of questions that required them to discuss their perceptions as performers (Creswell 1998:54). "Intentionality of consciousness" is a tenet of phenomenology espousing that people's consciousness of a social act or object is "inextricably related" to their realities of it (Creswell 1998:53). Thus agency and the meanings people give their experiences are given important consideration.

Phenomenology further entails taking clusters of significantly meaningful statements and writing about them texturally (i.e. what was experienced) and structurally (how it was experienced). This process concludes with giving the reader an understanding of the "essential invariant structure (or essence of the experience)" (Creswell 1998:55). The interviews conducted with participants in this study investigate their perceptions and common factors within meanings derived from their experiences.

Phenomenology is limited in that the essential invariant structure Creswell discusses as underlying the meanings people make of their realities may not exist. Also, this technique fails to consider concepts like hegemony and false consciousness and social constraints such as patriarchy that affect personal realities.

Definitions

For the purposes of this project, burlesque is defined as performance art that is often engaged with some form of striptease. Further, Becker argues that activities can only be comprehended when looking at the context and conditions necessary for them to transpire (1998:46-48). Therefore burlesque is also an activity that occurs when all conditions and circumstances come together to make it possible.

In formulating a definition of the eroticism contained in burlesque, Lorde (1978) asserts that eroticism is a sensually gratifying experience focused on desire and feeling (Cornell 2000). To assess exploitative experiences in neo burlesque, I use Vance (1984) and Dworkin's (1994) theories, who claim that it is a type of oppression that occurs within a system of patriarchal or male-dominated culture. According to Vance, oppression is linked to sexual danger, terror, and a system of male domination over women. The sexual danger women have experienced comes from the violence of rape, sexual harassment, incest, and the objectification of female bodies. Exploitation and oppression are inextricably joined with sexual terror and the possible dangers women can face in a patriarchal system (Vance 1984:3).

In this system of analysis, which I borrow for this project, liberatory experiences in burlesque are defined as the search for and implementation of pleasure, related to personal agency, choice, and the discovery of actions that challenge and resist patriarchy to create a safer and more pleasurable world for women. Vance (1984) states "our task is to identify what is pleasurable and under what conditions, and to control experience so that it occurs more frequently" (p. 6).

The Role of the Researcher

To understand why this research was initiated, it is important to understand my role in the study. Having a love for burlesque, I am relatively new to the topic. Feminist discourse on exploitation and liberation varies so widely that I decided to conduct a study to further enlighten myself and contribute to existing knowledge. I am interested in finding ways that women can participate in the things they desire freely, without exploitation, and the conditions that would be necessary for this to occur. Using a perspective largely influenced by third wave feminism, I examine new burlesque as a form of sexual expression that can add to feminist research on sexual politics.

The Textural-Structural Experience of Burlesque from Participant Observations

The textural and structural description of participant observations involves describing what happened (textural) and how the phenomenon happened (structural) in a descriptive narrative (Creswell 1998:55). The following narrative describes the neo burlesque phenomena I observed while attending ten shows.

For the burlesque experience, I was able to observe ten shows of one troupe who performed regularly, where participant observations were conducted from October 2004 to January 2005. In this dimly lit club, every week six female dancers, a comedian, and a singer graced the stage with a performance using fashion and choreography that evokes eras between the 1920s and 1950s.

Each Sunday night I observed this troupe, the pieces were performed to live big band music of various types which most often concludes in a stripping of layered costumes and a humorous punch line. The shows open with a comedian telling kitschy, hackneyed, self-deprecating jokes which lead to the introduction of troupe members. He performs solo,

entertaining with bawdy jokes between acts and occasionally performing with the troupe. His comedy as well as each act, involves slapstick humor incorporated with sexual and political messages, a long time tradition in burlesque entertainment. Unlike classic burlesque, this comedian makes himself the butt of his lewd jokes rather than the dancers.

During the run of shows I observed, a blonde female singer took the stage with an appearance and voice reminiscent of the 1940s, which added to the eclectic mix of history that came from each performance. Dances included those most popular between the 1920s and 1940s such as the Charleston and Fox Trot, and flapper dancers, but there were also traditional burlesque cooch dances that look similar to belly dancing. Each act had kitschy themes representing a different culture including a Russian snow queen, an Arabian beauty, an American cow girl, a beer-drinking German fraulein, an Asian geisha, and a Polynesian princess, all culminating in a striptease of partial nudity with pasties and some version of a g-string or bikini.

Occasionally the performers lead the audience to believe we would see full nudity then jokingly covered their breasts with a mocking look of astonishment for what they almost revealed. For these acts, each participant chose her own character, often drawing from her ancestry, and worked with Choreographer 1, to develop the dances. The purpose of representing different cultures was to show diverse women as sexy and beautiful while incorporating cultural themes and signifiers. The audience, a combination of old, young, gay and straight, observed sets of relative simplicity for each number, sometimes with only boxes, chairs, or whatever props match the theme or dance of the specific act.

Every week the performance is the same, enduring from weeks to months depending on its popularity. When attendance wanes the show closes, and the troupe begins creating and practicing for the next run of shows. Many groups develop their own shows individually, but

this troupe has a choreographer who practices with them weekly, perfecting dance posture, facial expressions, and other details. Dancing in their costumes takes practice, as this involves layers of clothing necessary for the striptease finale. One costume included the troupe wearing skirts that transformed into dancing rainbows when lifted, which was later stripped off to reveal their stocking clad legs.

The dances for the current run of this troupe's shows were created by collaboration between the group members and Choreographer 1, who has several years of dance experience. Choreographer 1 also arranged for the women to have training with Kitty West, a classic burlesque performer from the 1950s and 1960s.

In one presentation, four female dancers used seductive tango music while dancing with one another. The participants were wearing fitted black costumes with one dance partner playing a feminine role and the other representing a masculine role in a tuxedo and top hat. They teased the audience with where the dance would lead, which concluded in humor and the tease itself as the finale. Other numbers are slapstick with no tease involved, such as a 1920s dance where the performers wore bobbed wigs and flapper dresses and danced while making martinis.

In participant observations, sexual and gender orientation in the audience was diverse at times but race was fairly homogenous, with the majority of people being white, which was also the case with interviewees who all appeared to be white. Although classic burlesque was traditionally used as a form of expression for white women, the philosophy of diversity espoused by performers today makes it possible for burlesque to be enjoyed by women of color. Indeed this study is limited by respondents' homogenous race. All participants were white, with most having at least some college with others achieving college degrees. Each of the interviews was conducted at a location the participant was comfortable with, when possible, with the exception

of those who lived in other states. In these cases, interviews were conducted via telephone. The participants came from the areas of New Orleans, New York City, Chicago, and Washington D.C. They were asked to define burlesque, tell what impact burlesque had on their lives, the differences between burlesque and stripping, why they do burlesque, and if they identified as feminists. Further, they were asked about their performances, specifically the types of performances they create, the structures of their troupes and how much creative freedom they are allowed. After transcribing each interview myself, phenomenological techniques were utilized where meaning units were established to determine the essence of each experience.

Patterns, themes, and categories were established from the data collected and coded and analyzed according to a phenomenological method. Creswell states that the steps of phenomenological analysis involve "horizontalizing individual statements, creating meaning units, clustering themes, advancing textural and structural descriptions, and presenting an integration of textural and structural descriptions into an exhaustive description of the essential invariant structure (or essence) of the experience" (1998:176). This is done by first listing statements from interviews with burlesque performers in a horizontal fashion, establishing common meanings among statements, clustering these meaning under common themes, then describing their experiences on the basis of what happened and how it happened (texturally and structurally), and then analyzing for the essence of those experiences.

There were four different troupes and two solo performers interviewed from the New York, Chicago, D.C., and New Orleans areas. Interviews were conducted with ten female burlesque performers between the ages of 21 and 35. To tackle issues of verification such as internal validity, the information gathered and analyzed was discussed with participants. Other issues such as generalizability and replicability may be limited due to the differing contexts in

which neo burlesque can take place, inherent bias in coding, and my own personal biases influencing the study.

FINDINGS

For each participant, burlesque was used as a hobby, as each interviewee had a separate full time job. Two of them were sex workers. All others worked in office environments or the service industry. The participants have all been involved in burlesque for two years or less and have at least some college, with several having college degrees.

Participant	Age	Definitions of Burlesque	Rationale for Burlesque	Feminist
Participant 1	32	Sensual/sexual/self –expression	Body/Self acceptance; Expanding supportive social network; Empowering; Battling society expectations & standards	Yes
Participant 2	23	Sexual/self-expression	Body/Self acceptance; Empowering; Battling societal expectations & standards	No
Participant 3	35	Sexual expression	Body/Self acceptance; Empowering; Battling societal expectations & standards	No
Participant 4	21	Performance art	Creativity; Expanding social network; Nostalgia	No
Participant 5	23	Sensual/self-expression; performance art	Body/Self acceptance; Creativity; Expanding social network;	Yes
Participant 6	33	Performance art; Sexual-expression; Entertainment	Creativity; Sexual Expression	No
Participant 7	23	Performance art/entertainment	Body/Self acceptance; Creativity	No
Participant 8	26	Performance art/entertainment	Body/Self acceptance; Creativity; Expanding social network; Nostalgia	No
Participant 9	28	Self-expression; entertainment	Body/Self acceptance; Empowering; Battling societal expectations/standards	Yes
Participant 10	25	Performance art	Body/Self acceptance; Empowering;	Maybe

Liberatory Experiences for Performers

The phenomenological research method requires establishing common statements grouped into categorical meaning units to define the essence of the experience through participant voices. The goal is to uncover the essential invariant structure of a social act using a descriptive narrative. The meaning units as well as the incorporation of the voices of all subjects interviewed describe how liberation and exploitation are experienced as a burlesque dancer. Using individual stories, the essence or meaning is obtained from the textural (what happened) and structural (how it happened) events accounted by each person in the descriptive narrative.

Informants reported feeling liberated or empowered by their reasons for performing burlesque, the definitions they assigned it, and through personal experiences that allowed for control and choice in their performances. Liberation is tied to Vance's (1984) idea of pleasure coming from personal agency, choice, and being able to discover ways to challenge and resist patriarchal culture by controlling for experiences that attempt to limit or oppose exploitation. Libertory experiences were measured by the following three elements: pleasure, empowerment, and resisting patriarchy. Those who reported these aspects when doing burlesque were considered to have a liberating experience in the way liberation is defined for this study, which uses Vance's (1984) definition.

Definitions and rationale for burlesque. Interviewees assigned a variety of definitions to burlesque that accounted for their perceptions of burlesque as a liberating experience. The definitions they applied to burlesque or their reasons for performing it were directly connected to liberation. Common themes among these self-applied definitions included seeing burlesque as art/performance art, sensual/sexual/self-expression, entertainment, and the general idea that it was anything you make it. The themes are not discrete, as many informants applied numerous

overlapping definitions, but burlesque was most frequently defined as performance art and self-expression.

Other performers described burlesque as being a talent show, variety show, or cabaret. As the informants described their performances, tap dance, swing dance, various other dances, singing, comedy, mockery, ridicule, and social and political commentary were often part of shows. Their flexible definitions of burlesque allowed for a variety of performance elements. Some performers used elements of sexuality or sensuality for their definitions, but numerous meanings were applied to it, demonstrating that to participants, burlesque has no standard classification.

Respondents also reported numerous reasons as to why they chose to participate in burlesque. In some cases, how a performer defined burlesque was directly linked to their reason for engaging in it. For example, those who defined burlesque as creative expression performed it because they wanted a creative outlet. The rationales for doing burlesque did not contain discrete categories, but rather reasons that tied into one another. Informants reported reasons for performing burlesque that dealt with expression, structural control over performance, access to burlesque, nostalgia, and body/self image. Some also enjoyed burlesque for the sensual and sexual expression it affords them.

All interviewees described being allowed degrees of control in their shows from permission to give advice, ideas, and suggestions to full responsibility for production, direction, acting, writing, choreography, music, and costuming. Some reported that because of their involvement in the scene they met numerous people, often talented and creative, whom they felt they may not have met otherwise. This expanded their social networks, particularly during burlesque festivals, which allowed the opportunity for networking and consequently became a

reason to continue in burlesque. Although the structures of troupes varied, each informant experienced creative freedom, which became another rationale for participation.

Interviewees asserted that little training was neededfor burlesque, which permits burlesque to become accessible. Most performers had experience in dancing, acting, or singing, but none had special training in burlesque prior to joining a troupe or developing solo acts. Participants mainly became involve through going to shows and getting to know performers who would serve as mentors or guides to help them learn some basics; others learned simply by observing.

Some participants reported body/self acceptance such as feeling increased self-esteem and self-confidence, which was liberating or empowering to them and a reason to perform burlesque. Because of the positive experiences other performers reported, one informant started in burlesque. Body type becomes an important element to examine whether new burlesque women undergo pressures to conform to an idealized feminine standard. Body types varied with each troupe. The shows I attended for one troupe contained women of arguably thin to "average" weight. Three performers in this troupe had the toned bodies of dancers resulting from years of professional dance training. One troupe only allowed members who were size 14 or above and in a telephone interview with a participant, she considers herself a "woman who's a bit larger."

Personal perceptions held by informants can account for liberating experiences. Participants attributed getting naked on stage and receiving appreciation from the audience as a positive personal experience that was empowering. They perceived the audience as being receptive to their messages about accepting and valuing different beauty and body standards,

which was also a liberating experience. Empowerment and liberation were often directly tied to audience support.

Socially, interviewees formed friendships and social networks with other women and creative people as a result of burlesque. They reported feelings of community, shared experiences with the audience, and battling against societal expectations and standards as liberating, positive experiences. In fact, burlesque was often referred to as a community in itself.

Participants often discussed battling social expectations and standards through the burlesque display of bodies, sexuality, gender, and political and social messages in performances. This aspect of burlesque is tied to the liberating element of resisting patriarchy. Participant 1 felt that her experience contained elements of nonconformity, especially expectations regarding women getting naked on stage. This resulted from doing what she thought was something different from what the audience anticipates when watching women striptease. The diverse bodies showcased on stage caused her to feel her actions were nonconformist. For example, she had been a dancer nearly her entire life with experience in numerous types of dance, as well as stripping. As a dancer, Participant 1 was continuously told she was not thin enough. She found relief from what she viewed as rigid standards when she started in burlesque because to her, it is not about the body of the performer being forced to fit a certain type. Rather, burlesque is about the acceptance of your body and the message that sends to the audience. This allowed Participant 1 freedom to be herself and have fun with dancing. Formerly a stripper, she has experience in doing what the audience expects during a striptease. In burlesque enjoys giving them something they may not expect. In doing so, she asserts that she is defeating society's expectations and standards about beauty and the body.

For most performers, their battles with societal expectations and standards stemmed from using burlesque as a way to feel good about themselves and inspiring others to do the same. Participant 5, who self-identified as a feminist, did not believe rallies and marches created much change but that change could be insinuated through education, awareness, and engaging in conversation with others. However, she stated that burlesque is useful for inspiring change, especially about body image.

All interviewees differentiated burlesque from stripping in their definitions. Many saw stripping as a degrading job where women have to sell themselves for money by pleasing their customers who are mainly men. Although most informants viewed stripping negatively, nearly everyone respected it, recognizing it as a difficult job. The most prevalent difference reported was body type and money. The majority felt that burlesque was different from stripping or sex work in general because they did not have to perform burlesque to afford living expenses, noting that they make little to no profits.

Much like Sloan and Wahab's (2004) study of topless dancers, burlesque women, like non-conformists, have the choice to leave if it becomes harmful or if they become burned out. The fact that burlesque is voluntary for these subjects is evidence that the context of performers and whether they have the freedom to stop participation, matters. If performers, like survivors in Sloan and Wahab's (2004) research, had little choice in leaving the industry it could affect liberating experiences.

Many positive experiences were reported by informants, but liberating experiences were accounted for by the pleasure and empowerment they experienced through feelings of community, creative expression, and the fact that little training was needed to become involved. Liberation is measured by Vance's (1984) definition linking pleasure and challenging patriarchy.

Respondents were also liberated by creating a space for body and self acceptance, the battling of societal expectations and standards about beauty, sexuality, femininity, and differentiating stripping from burlesque, all of which resists patriarchy. Because the definition of burlesque is flexible, it can be transformed into what the performer makes it, if she is allowed creative freedom, which is a key factor in what makes the experience liberating.

Exploitative Experiences for Performers

Exploitation is measured by Vance (1984) and Dworkin's (1994) idea that it exists within a male-dominated culture where, as Vance states, women are subjected to sexual danger and terror. Therefore, respondents who reported the possibility of or actual occurrence of sexualized violence were exploited. Some experiences were negative, but did not fall under the category of exploitation.

Few exploitative or negative experiences were reported. Perhaps the most profoundly exploitive experience was when an audience member inappropriately touched a burlesque performer as she was leaving the stage. Other occurrences of this kind were audience insults and confusion about burlesque, which created stressful, negative experiences. Negative experiences also resulted from venue selection, which contained unsupportive audiences or staff members. Some venues failed to properly prepare for the show or to meet the needs of performers.

Poor management was a negative experience for one troupe that resulted in their disbanding. Their producer managed their money inadequately, spending too much on costumes and not enough on advertising. The group was not aware they were losing money until it was too late and they could no longer afford their back-up band. Since their shows consisted of extremely classic burlesque, they felt they would be unable to perform without the band and were forced to break up. Other problems with their finances included their choreographer

getting paid nothing, while the dancers were paid little and the band was paid a disproportionately large sum of money. In the end, they discovered their male producer had another troupe waiting on the sidelines. All other troupes were managed by women or employed democratic leadership.

Respondents reported few exploitative and negative experiences. The exploitative experiences recounted describe subjection to inappropriate touching or comments from male audience members, a patriarchal context that could not be controlled. Loss of control is directly related to exploitation, whether through the individuals' creative freedom or the actions of others. The loss of control is where sexual danger and terror become possible and show evidence of patriarchal domination and the limits to liberation in that context.

The Textural-Structural Experience of Burlesque for the Performers

To achieve a clear picture of how exploitation and liberation are experienced for performers, the following is a phenomenological descriptive narrative that illustrates what burlesque is like for the participants. These accounts describe how the performers came to burlesque, their perceptions of what they do, and the kind of experiences they have, both exploitative and liberating.

Participant 1's burlesque experience. Participant 1 is a 34 year old who came to burlesque through her 15 years of experience with professional dance as well as some time spent stripping. She saw it as a sensual experience, stating that "burlesque is really… about the whole process of getting naked and entertaining… Not everybody can do what I do and that's empowering to me. It's about the tease… Burlesque is dancing while you're getting naked. It is also an experience of nonconformity for her because it is about the acceptance of women's bodies stating that "when people think of strippers, they think of fake boobs." With burlesque,

she pointed out that there are choreographed, traditional dances, some of which her troupe learned from Kitty West.

Participant 1 remarked that the type of striptease of conventional stripping seems different from that of burlesque. She distinguished it from stripping because of the costumes and music involved as well: "with stripping… they're pretty much naked for the most part." Tipping is another distinction she used to define burlesque as separate from stripping.

Participant 1 reported sensual/sexual/self expression reasons for participating in burlesque entertainment. "I do burlesque because I can be myself. I can be myself and they encourage that saying-what-I-want kind of thing, not conforming; and I'm not talking about dress or anything. I'm talking about as a human being, not conforming…I'm like a different person. It's a lot of fun [to] you know, put on a different wig and lots of make-up and I feel absolutely glamorous and beautiful when I do. I feel like a superstar, even though I'm not. It's helped to give me personally an outlet for my spirit, for my love, for my sensuality, for my sexuality."

Burlesque can be challenging for Participant 1 because she occasionally worries what people will think of her performance. However, she feels a sense of freedom to do what she wants on stage, where she can be herself without conforming to societal standards. This is the atmosphere her troupe encourages as well by allowing an open environment for input, ideas, or suggestions.

Participant 1 stated that working as a professional dancer was stressful at times because she was always told she was not thin enough. With her troupe and their performances she doesn't feel this same pressure. She likes burlesque because it brought her closer to other females than she ever had been, stating that there is a sense of solidarity or "sisterhood" between

dancers because they are "battling against old mentalities [by] "doing something that is completely different from what other people imagined…It's affected me by being with other women who are strong and intelligent. I mean, several of us have college degrees."

Participant 2's burlesque experience. Participant 2 is a 23 year old member of Troupe 2 who loves to make people laugh, which is why her shows usually involve some sort of comedy or parody. She states that there are many different ways people can interpret the definition of burlesque, but for her "it's any type of classic striptease that involves comedy or parody in something… I don't think burlesque always has to be erotic. I mean, I think that it definitely can be and when its done well it is, but it doesn't have to be."

Participant 2 came to burlesque by "being a ham since birth" and being a fan for many years. She had some dance training as a child but mostly learned burlesque through the guidance of a mentor who showed her how to perform. Now she teaches a burlesque class, as well as performing with two other women who hold a weekly show at the same venue that has been running for two years. This troupe (Troupe 2), who recently became an official business, develops their acts independently of one another, which Participant 2 says allows for a lot of personal freedom.

There is "a certain kind of affirmation from being on stage" for Participant 2. When she's having what she calls "an ass day" and feeling insecure about her body she uses the stage to showcase her insecurities. For instance, her performance might focus on a particular body part that she's feeling insecure about or she may incorporate a dance that focuses on a section of her body. The result is "such adoration and love from the audience that it makes you realize that there is someone out there who thinks that you're fabulous." Performing is an "amazing experience" for her because she enjoys giving of herself. She hopes her performance will

enlighten the audience or make them laugh. What is important for her, as a "woman who is a bit larger," is to spread the message of body type acceptance, adding that her inspirations "are not small women." She loves burlesque because she can "feel and look really sexy" without ascribing to Hollywood standards. This is one of her "biggest reasons" for doing burlesque; she can feel good about herself while spreading the message of beauty acceptance. However, the audience's positive reaction is what makes it "fun" and "exhilarating." She also asserts that burlesque is something anyone can do, whether for themselves, someone they love, or an audience. It helps bring out the "sexy, comedic, smart, witty, fun, diva goddess" that is in all of us.

It was often reported by informants that being proud to show off their body types gave audience members the notion that they can accept and love their bodies and themselves. As Participant 2 emphasized "I think that people are kind of catching on to the fact that a woman or a man or a trans person can feel, can be incredibly sexy and not look like Lara Flynn Boyle… They don't have to look Hollywood and they can still feel and look really sexy, which I think is awesome... I feel I'm doing my part in letting the audience know that 'hey it's okay to look at me and think I look good and not feel as though I need to lose weight or be taller or have lighter hair or something. Because I'm a short, fat, brunette, which is fabulous.'"

Participant 2 distinguishes burlesque from stripping as well. One important difference for her is that a burlesque dancer keeps every penny she makes, while a stripper has to "hustle" for tips to survive. She feels a stripper's job is much harder because there is a sense of competition between that comes from hustling. "You're fighting for your paycheck…They're not given an audience who wants to look at them." Burlesque is different from sex work because

it is not used solely for income, but for a hobby. There is no hustling involved and the performers have a choice to leave the field if they desire.

Structural control over performance was a common reason for informants doing burlesque. As Participant 2 noted "I get to write, direct, and produce my own acts, which is really, there is no other medium that I have found that can support me in this way. I find [burlesque] allowing [me] freedom to express myself… and it's just, you give of yourself when you perform and it's an amazing experience, absolutely."

She is not a feminist, but Participant 2 sees burlesque as empowering. The impact it has had on her life has been "consuming." It allows her to "feel productive." She claims that being able to create something new that has never been seen by anyone is "an incredibly fulfilling feeling."

Participant 3's burlesque experience. Participant 3 is 35 years old and the leader of Troupe 3. She asserts, "I think burlesque, as far as dancing, is just a whole bunch of women who want to express themselves in a sexual way." She describes burlesque as an outlet for sexual expression. According to Participant 3, the revival of burlesque is due to the need for sexual expression "in a sexually depraved society." Participant 3 worked in theater growing up and loves being on stage. She has no formal dance training so in her first burlesque audition she did what she "thought was best" and was awarded the part.

Participant 3, who has been doing burlesque for two years, meets with her troupe every week and they discuss venues and individual performances. Her troupe members create their own numbers (the "DIY," or do-it-yourself approach) and she gives suggestions to the final products. Participant 3 enjoys performing classic burlesque but allows her troupe to add their individual styles, stating that as a whole they are "a little more punk rock." Sometimes they use

political humor with leftist messages, but most of the time she prefers humorous performances. She claims the past two years have had a tremendous impact on her life because burlesque caused her to strive for her creative goals.

Participant 3 performs burlesque because of "pure passion…It gives me a creative outlet and vehicle to express myself in a way where it's safe and beautiful and creative." She says she feels alive on stage because "you're exposing yourself not just physically, but emotionally, mentally, creatively [using] more of your senses on stage then you could in daily life." She believes the audience appreciates the vulnerability displayed in burlesque and that this causes them to feel apart of the performance. This allows her to feel connected to the audience. "It's the whole message we're getting across. You know, that we're all different sizes, we're all different women, and we're all still beautiful. And to go up on stage and get that point across and people actually receive it, it's amazing."

Although she is not a feminist, Participant 3 believes the media and society make "women feel like they aren't worthy of themselves or anyone else." She maintains that the media is responsible for women's insecurities, but that getting to know yourself and being comfortable with who you are is empowering, which is something she has achieved doing burlesque. "So, you know I think it's just to help women be more aware of how precious we are and beautiful and you know, caring. I think this revival has come at the perfect time, especially with the way Hollywood has distorted how women should look and act and feel and be." It is important for Participant 3 that people know burlesque performers are "not just strippers," but "creative, strong, individual women who are trying to enlighten the world and our society, and men, of course. We're actually creative, talented dancers, actresses, comedians, singers, and musicians."

Participant 4's burlesque experience. Participant 4 is a 21 year old who performs with two other women in Troupe 2. Her burlesque performances are generally in the classic style with orchestral music selections and old dances. She uses striptease and claims she has never had a problem with getting naked. When she first started doing burlesque, she worried more about falling on stage than nudity. Feeling comfortable with her body on stage helped her with the little training she had. Participant 4 said it came "naturally" to her to perform and it was a lot of fun because of the "festive atmosphere" and positive reactions from an audience that is usually quite diverse. For her, the dominant focus of burlesque shows is glamour and fun, rather than sexuality. She described her stage experience "It's really great! It's just a really great feeling to know that people are watching you and they're having fun… I just feel really wonderful and you know, you're making people feel good and the vibe is good… It's about making everyone feel good. If you feel good on stage, you're going to make someone else feel good off stage in the audience."

Participant 4 performs burlesque because of her fascination with "old movie stars and Broadway starlets." She grew bored of acting and making movies, eventually turning to burlesque because of the room for creativity and accompanying fame. Participant 4 noted that her performances are classical, traditional types of burlesque and that she is not interested in presenting a political message; she enjoys the glamour burlesque affords her. Although striptease is included in her performance, she does not see it as the same as stripping, "the key difference is that stripping is a job… a stripper is a hard job. It's a girl who has to make money and she has to sell herself even harder for her audience to like her… whereas a burlesque girl is more of a performer." Participant 4 does not consider herself a feminist. She thinks "it's great" if women feel good about striptease but that does not cause her to want to identify as a feminist.

The impact of burlesque on Participant 4s life has been positive. Before she was not friends with many women but since performing she has more female friendships and feels better about her body. She attributes improvements in her self-image to striptease. Her negative experiences have been few. She described one experience: "I did a gig for a friend. It was his theater company. It was a Halloween show a few years ago, and I was the only burlesque girl. People didn't know what burlesque was then, so when I came out there and I did my thing, the girls were appalled that I took my clothes off and it was kind of embarrassing. Sometimes people just don't know what it is… so you can't really blame them. I looked at them and they were like 'what?!'… And I also performed in this place in Brooklyn and it was kind of an off night where the people had no idea – there again, they didn't know what burlesque was, so you know, when I came out, they were just like 'What? But she's not taking all her clothes off,' so they got kind of confused and then they were kind of angry and so that was kind of uncomfortable." Participant 4 stated that most of the time the audience is "passive" but occasionally she notices "loudmouthed guys" in the audience. A way to avoid bad audiences is to get references and check with other performers about venues and the kinds of crowds it draws. She asserted "if it's a new club, I won't perform there because it's like they don't know what burlesque is and I wouldn't enjoy myself and it's just kind of weird."

Participant 5's burlesque experience. "Burlesque is anything you want it to be… for some people it's an art form. For others, "it's more sensual," according to Participant 5, who is a member of Troupe 2. For Participant 5, burlesque is a way to express herself "in any possible way [she is] inspired to do it." She feels it is very "liberating and empowering," claiming it helps her and other people know it is okay to feel comfortable with your body.

Participant 5 is a 22 year old and has been in burlesque for a year and a half. She did not have any prior training but has experience performing on stage with bands. She enjoys burlesque because she feels the audience is supportive regardless of whether she takes her clothes off.

Participant 5 does not have a singular definition for burlesque: "for some people it's an art form. For others, it's more sensual… I think it's an art form. I think it's celebratory. I think its fun and it should be. I think it's just – it's really an art form… Burlesque has some level of humor to it. Some performers are more slapsticky… and other ones are very dark." Participant 5 stated that she uses tap dance in her shows. "Sometimes I use tap dance, but I don't want to be considered a tap dancer – that's not what I'm trying to do, so I try to mix it up."

Participant 5 is a feminist, but she does not use political messages in her performances. Occasionally the troupe will tie in politics when they perform together for events like election time. Participant 5 firmly claims a feminist identity simply because she was "born female… When you really stop and think about it, all the short ends of the stick women get and really stop to think, wait, why? It's just a matter of realizing that things have been this way for so long and it needs to not be that way. It's like every single aspect of a woman's life. I'm not – I don't consider myself an activist – I don't go to marches and parades because I honestly don't think that makes many changes… But I think just kind of working in more subtle ways – being aware of things, educating myself, having conversations, seeing what can be done on a small scale, definitely."

When asked why she participates in burlesque she claimed "I have a need to perform and I feel like doing burlesque encompasses these needs and I can do anything I want with it… This is good for me because I can scratch that itch. I can make up my own – I can be a director, I can be my own choreographer. It's really a self-esteem thing, so it gives me that creative freedom

and it's really, really satisfying." She added "the other thing I love about it beyond [creative freedom] is the community. You know, [where I live] can be a really – even though it's really crowded – it can be isolated to live, it can be lonely, so it just feels good to know that if I go to a show or I go to see someone else's show, I'm going to know everybody there [performers] and that feels good, to have that sense of friendship. It's almost like family."

Participant 5's group recently became an official business. She said "we just do it that way in case we have bigger ventures happening because we have other performers [which] make it easier to pay them that way… So we have a contract between the three of us. That may be a little more extreme way to operate to people but it works out, especially since we're like officially communist together. We call ourselves communist because of the decision-making process because it's all very equal. No one has more power than another member." This troupe divides work among them for each show and uses the DIY approach for individual performances.

Like many other interviewees, Participant 5 also differentiated burlesque from stripping. She asserted "I'm a huge supporter of sex work of all kinds and I definitely really support sex workers. A lot of burlesque performers may think we're superior because we don't have to do it [to survive]. I think, as I've said before, [stripping] is a job you go and do and don't necessarily love every minute of it but you have to hustle to make a lot of money."

Participant 5 noted that the audiences in burlesque are usually very supportive and diverse, especially since her troupe is known for being queer friendly. She described one negative experience with an audience member "I only had one very, very negative experience a few months ago and it was this one really, really drunk audience member… and as we were

walking out of the show, he grabbed my ass. His audience partner at the time forced him to leave and almost got into a fight. It was pretty intense."

Participant 6's burlesque experience. Participant 6 defines burlesque as "old classic performance," and "variety with tease," adding that it does not have to be about stripping. For her burlesque is a fun form of self-expression. She emphasized that she needed little training, using her experience as a stripper for eleven years to guide her.

Participant 6 is 33 years old and became involved in Troupe 3 less than a year ago because she knew two of the performers. She was immediately given creative control over her performances and learned as she went along. She contends it has been one of the best experiences she has ever had because of how burlesque differs from stripping "I was a stripper and I knew about [burlesque] and wanted to bring back the innocence and art to stripping because [burlesque] is more of an art than stripping. It's theater. It's dance." Participant 6 does not claim to be a feminist but like many feminists, she feels "people are tired of regular stripping. Girls want to put the art and class back into [striptease]. It's supposed to be fun. [Burlesque] is not about sex, but the actual show itself, and leaving something to the imagination. Most girls don't like to strip, but do it for the money. The stripper audience comes in expecting you to like them and want to be with them and you have to live up to their fantasy to make money. They don't understand it's just a job." Participant 6 envisions how wonderful it would be if strip clubs were closed down and replaced with burlesque shows because, she affirmed, burlesque is an art form.

Participant 6 maintains involvement in burlesque because of the art and creativity of it. She emphasized that it has had a positive impact on her life, "It's changed a lot of the way I see dancing." She has also learned about costume design. Burlesque became important to her

because as a stripper she witnessed a lot of dancers mindlessly perform the same stage number over and over. Many of them were stripping for money and supporting drug habits. She admitted to drinking champagne every night so she could relax and sustain herself throughout each shift. With burlesque she still thinks of herself as a performer, but what have changed are the added glamour and the types of people she performs for. "People that come to burlesque performances know what they're coming for." In stripping you must "fulfill their fantasies and be convincing so they'll tip you. They don't want to know that you're not just there for fun; you're not just there to turn them on."

Negative experiences in burlesque have been extremely rare for Participant 6, who stated the only time she did experience something negative was when an audience member made a comment to the effect of "where did you get those strippers?" This was a negative experience for Participant 6 because she gets discouraged when the audience fails to recognize or appreciate the performance as an art form.

Participant 7's burlesque experience. For Participant 7, burlesque contains all the sexiness of stripping but leaves more of the tease element in place, along with comic relief to make people laugh and enjoy themselves. Participant 7 had no training for burlesque other than two years of ballet and tap dancing, but she loves dancing. When she started burlesque she had "really bad stage fright," but eventually grew accustomed to performing. She stated "it doesn't seem like you're nude on stage," pointing out that they are "not just strippers." She differentiates stripping from burlesque by the theatrical aspects in burlesque and because it is not done to afford a living.

Participant 7 is 23 years old and a member of Troupe 3. She came to burlesque when she first learned what it was. After doing some research she decided to become involved because of

the reported creative outlet is was for others. After joining, she learned to sew her own costumes, pasties, and headpieces, as most burlesque dancers do. Participant 7 does not identify as a feminist though she does declare that "people are sick of being so sexualized and like to see things that are sexy without being so in-your-face. People want to be teased, laugh, and have fun. They are sick of sex and violence. Burlesque can be about enjoying simple things, like ankles." Her performances usually involve classic style burlesque using music like Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald, but occasionally she uses modern music and incorporates "a little bit of everything."

In the year of her participation, burlesque has had a positive impact on Participant 7's life. She is more confident and comfortable with herself and her sexuality. She has also been able to collaborate on performance ideas, which has allowed creative freedom.

Participant 7 sees a connection with classic and neo burlesque. She feels burlesque performers throughout history have been rebels, but that dancers today are different in that they are more likely to have tattoos and piercings.

Participant 8's burlesque experience. Participant 8, a solo performer, hesitated to define burlesque, "I don't like defining it. It's very visual, physical, and visceral. It's also comedic striptease or vaudeville… I forget about the erotic part of burlesque because it's something else for me… I get caught up in the comedic side because I want it to be funny. I don't feel sexual when I perform." Participant 8 occasionally performs duets, but most of her work is done alone and is completely "character driven." She wants to entertain and at the same time, make people think and she is always looking for ways to create a more diverse audience because burlesque has a liberating effect. (She claims that for the most part her audience is "pale," which she defines as white.") Participant 8 states that burlesque can be used to educate people on

acceptance of body type but it can also be liberating for "whatever the particular issue is" that the performer wants to convey.

Participant 8 was a fan of burlesque for a long time but had no prior training or performance background when she started. She was encouraged by other burlesque performers to pursue her interests, asserting "it's a welcoming community… they don't care about your background." Participant 8, a 26 year old, does burlesque because of the way it makes her feel, " I liked the way I felt watching other people do it and wanted to give that feeling back. I want to entertain and make people think. I also like the feeling of camaraderie I get with the people I meet and the places I go, especially with other burlesque girls." Although she is sleep deprived at times when striving to mold a performance, she asserts that burlesque has had a positive impact on her life. She is better able to communicate off stage because of her new found confidence.

Another reason Participant 8 performs burlesque is the "rush" she feels on stage, especially when she can "get a good crowd." She also loves the diversity of body types and the element of reality burlesque brings to the stage in the presentation of bodies. Participant 8 is not a feminist, but her personal motto is to try to do as much good and as little harm as possible and burlesque has helped her bring this element into her shows.

Participant 9's burlesque experience. Participant 9 is a 28 year old feminist performer from Troupe 4 who runs a unique group. They identify as "mostly queer and all fat and you must be a size 14 or above." This troupe also has a member who is differently-abled. Having limited use of her legs, they work around her abilities in their shows. To Participant 9, burlesque is defined as mockery, and "a means to expand cultural acceptance of beauty and to convey messages about that and to use feminine power to convey messages about politics." Since she

has a flexible schedule she can easily find time to do shows at night, which leaves some time for their tour with a drag king group and involvement in the transgender community.

Participant 9 claims that she needed no specific training for burlesque but used music videos for dance ideas, maintaining that confidence and improvising are good tools to have for stage presence. Her troupe mocks femme identity in their shows by using "hyper femininity." Many of their members have a "high feminine identity" in the queer community that they exaggerate on stage.

When her troupe started, they envisioned an "entirely democratic process," which was defined as equal work and equal say, but eventually this amounted to equal say and unequal amounts of work. Ultimately the group agreed to allow two members, who already felt they were doing most of the work, to take charge. Usually they have a new performance for each show.

Participant 9 described her first experience being on stage as nerve-wracking. However, being on stage now feels like a "rush" and a "blur" even when things go wrong. She says burlesque often feels like a "high." At first she expected negative reactions from various audiences but she is surprised that they still haven't received disapproving comments. Overall, their audiences have been extremely supportive.

Burlesque, both classic and new, is viewed as social commentary for Participant 9 and its purpose is to empower and entertain those who watch. Occasionally she uses traditional elements of burlesque dancing but likes a mix of modern and classic music.

Participant 9 affirms that burlesque has had a positive impact on her life. It often feels like a second full time job but she "can express the freest side of [her] self outside of a conservative job." Participant 9 described how she used to have an eating disorder and hated

herself but because of burlesque she has learned to love herself. Now, instead of picking apart those things that she does not like about her body, she views it in its whole form, as a beautiful instrument that can make people laugh, entertain them, and send affirming messages about self-love and acceptance. Her whole body has a purpose on stage as she loses awareness of her limitations. Participant 9 also makes her own costumes and views this as creative freedom. Burlesque gives people "permission to feel sexy," causing them to think about themselves in different ways. Participant 9 hopes burlesque helps her audience to "feel more comfortable in their own skin," and to focus on "how well your parts work together."

Participant 10's burlesque experience. For Participant 10, burlesque is defined as "performance art, maybe [with] more dancing and attitude than striptease," though she acknowledges these aspects are just part of what it is about. Participant 10 is a 25 year old, who is a member of Troupe 3. She has a lifetime of experience on stage as she has been performing since the age of 3. However, she contends little training is needed for burlesque "I don't know that you really need any [training], just a certain level of stage presence and confidence and self-esteem. I don't think you really need any. Burlesque isn't that hard to figure out."

Participant 10 participates in burlesque performance for several reasons. She experiences a "rush" or "high" from being on stage because the "instant ramification of the audience's reaction [is] empowering [and] very satisfying. I think burlesque in particular is empowering for women. I think that's why people get into it." She described how a couple of years ago she did not have as much self-confidence. Going home recently, her improved confidence grabbed the attention of her friends, "people there noticed how much more confident I was and more social and outspoken, so it helps me." She emphasized that burlesque is more confidence-building than

other types of performances "because you're pretty much putting yourself out there," adding that the audience is also easy to please.

Participant 10 doesn't identify fully as a feminist, "I don't really label myself as [a feminist]. I've gotten more, I think, in that direction, having been in burlesque. You feel so empowered by it that you feel pulled that way, but I'm not like that I would say. It can bring out those kinds of ideas I think." For her, burlesque is more about artistic expression, which is why women are interested in it, "women are sick of stripping and being in that kind of situation. I think they want something that's a little more fun, a little more classy, a little more empowering." Participant 10 also stressed that women become involved with burlesque for numerous reasons but ultimately they have good experiences.

In her solo acts, Participant 10 likes to use elements of classic burlesque as well as new ideas because "we don't live in that time anymore." Recently her troupe used this method to address current issues. The group performed a number during election time that had a clear-cut political message with classic burlesque mockery. They used the tune "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" and dressed in snugly fitting cache fatigues. Underneath, they were clad in red, white, and blue. As they danced, the backsides of their outfits declared "Say No To" with the punch line delivered on their front side simply reading "Bush." Participant 10 stated that the troupe received a strong reaction every time, but that the audience has always enjoyed this performance.

Essence of Liberatory Experiences

Flexible definitions of burlesque allowed each performer to express themselves in a way they desired. This is a distinctive component to them of what separates burlesque from stripping. Classic and neo burlesque performers are sometimes considered strippers but a closer look at the definition performers applied to it indicates that burlesque is different from sex work. The

accommodating definition of burlesque, particularly that performers mentioned that a sexual focus was not required in performances is what separates it from sex work. Some participants reported integrating comedy, dancing, singing, and acting. Creative freedom permeates burlesque performance. The interviewees were allowed a choice in what they performed, permitting control over their shows. With such control, they could form shows into what they wanted, shaping their definitions of burlesque. For example, if a show was about sexual expression or social commentary, the performer would define burlesque as sexual expression or social commentary. Burlesque is a combination of stripping and entertainment. It is not simply stripping or performance art, but often takes the form of whatever the participant chooses.

Burlesque allows for degrees of control. Troupes differed in structure, permitting varying degrees of control over performance. Troupe 1 had a separate manager and choreographer, while the members worked under her instruction, with some room for individual suggestions and ideas, while other troupes were democratic with individual performances that were independently created. Group structures permitted performers to maintain levels of control through costuming, directing, acting, singing, and choreographing – ultimately, control over production. Burlesque performers curbed exploitative elements through creative influence. Varying degrees of power over the direction of creative and artistic endeavors and self-expression provided a rationale for performers to participate in burlesque as well as a way to oppose exploitation.

Control and choice are key elements to what made burlesque a liberating experience for its participants. As Vance (1984) said "Our task is to identify what is pleasurable and under what conditions, and to control experience so that it occurs more frequently (p. 6). This is what neo burlesque women are trying to accomplish through self-created shows that control for how sexuality, gender, and body acceptance are presented to the audience. To some extent, this is due

to the flexible definitions applied, which paves the way for varieties of individual talents that may exist without experience or training. Adaptable definitions, which provided freedom over what to perform and control over how to perform it, were what burlesque dancers found liberating. Informants often described how burlesque served as a vehicle for desired self-expression, as Participant 5 noted "It's just a way to express myself in any possible way I'm inspired to do it. Burlesque is really kind of liberating and empowering." Liberation was linked to how burlesque was defined as well as the message performers convey to the audience.

The flexible definitions of burlesque, which allowed for creative freedom, permitted it to be used for self, sensual, sexual, or artistic expression. Furthermore, participants did not have pressure to be consistently sexualized in their performances. They frequently mixed elements of dance, singing, and comedy often choosing their own music and choreography. Choice and control led to a personalized experience of burlesque for each informant. It was empowering for performers to be able to choose what to be, whether that was sexual or not. Particularly, freedom of self-expression and creativity became an incentive to incorporate artistic elements. When burlesque was used for sexual expression, performers thought that controlling how their sexuality was presented to the audience was empowering.

Some interviewees were tired of the sexualized images they see in Hollywood movies and the media. Burlesque became a vehicle to reclaim control over sexualized images of women. Specifically, women who possessed marginal identities because of weight or sexual orientation used their shows to convey messages of acceptance of diversity. This was especially the case with Participant 9's troupe, who identify as all queer and fat (defined as size 14 and above) and include a member who is differently-abled.

Because burlesque proved to be accessible, this was an incentive to become involved. Many performers expressed that it was easy to learn and no prior experience was necessary. This provided performers with a way to liberate them that was more attainable.

Two respondents expressed nostalgia as a reason for becoming involved with burlesque. Nostalgia is a longing for a former time in a culture of distress or disenchantment. Participant 4 described to me how after 9/11, the local entertainment scene was abruptly immersed in burlesque and vaudeville performances. Nostalgia does a play a role in neo burlesque, as some of it is reminiscent of eras between the 1920s and 1950s. Legg (2004) discusses how "trauma and nostalgia are theoretically and practically linked" (p. 103). This is not to say that burlesque performers have been traumatized, but that nostalgia reminisces a time before trauma. Informants revised the history of burlesque to suit their present needs, focusing on the positive aspects of the past that they found liberating. McDermott (2002) analyzes how memory work is meaningful. She found that the past was considered open to change and alteration to those examining it. New burlesque performers viewed "old fashioned starlets" in a positive manner, seeing them as glamorous. They wanted to revive this piece of history and rejuvenate elements of it that they found empowering.

Rationales for doing for burlesque were also related to improved self/body image because of audience approval. Although many performers design their own shows, their degree of control is limited insofar as what the audience finds acceptable and entertaining. Therefore, improvements in self/body image are somewhat contingent upon how tolerant the audience is to what they are viewing. The audience, as a social force, is thus connected to increased self-esteem and body acceptance for burlesque performers. However, Participant 4 stated she would be able to feel good about herself through other mediums "It's probably because of the fact that

I'm taking my clothes off. What I do is just to have another outlet in life. If I did something else I think I would feel good, but the burlesque community is really wonderful." This suggests that Participant 4 is aware that taking off her clothes and receiving a positive audience response makes her feel good. She knows that other outlets would permit her to have a confident self-image, but she also gives the burlesque community credit for their support.

Feelings of empowerment or liberation were experienced through support of fellow burlesque performers. Most interviewees reported establishing friendships, especially with women, which is evidence that burlesque can promote unity between women involved. Communal feelings increased their self-esteem and served as a positive influence in their lives.

Improvements in self-esteem were associated with community support for many participants, so audience support is only part of the equation. Many respondents expressed enjoying burlesque because of the communal ties and establishing friendships with other women. The burlesque experience as whole was considered empowering for all interviewees, as Participant 10 said "I think burlesque in particular is empowering for women. I think that's why people get into it." Feelings of empowerment or liberation were experienced through support of the audience as well as fellow burlesque performers. Most interviewees reported establishing friendships, especially with women, which is evidence that burlesque can promote unity between women involved. Communal feelings increased their self-esteem and served as a positive influence in their lives. Two interviewees in particular reported never being close to women prior to getting involved in burlesque. They attributed the welcoming, free-thinking, accepting, and nurturing atmosphere of their troupes and other performers as to why they formed bonds with one another. There was, rather than a competition-driven environment, a community-like

atmosphere that respondents enjoyed. Also, many felt they were involved in a form of nonconformity that challenged oppressive beauty, sexuality, and body standards for women.

Respondents also felt empowerment by being able to have creative freedom and provide social and political commentary in their shows. Positive experiences such as these were linked to personalizing performances which could meet personal and creative goals as well as permit freedom in sexual expression.

Many performers articulated distaste for the excessive sexualization of women, especially in the media, and like that burlesque brought back appreciation for simple, diverse beauty and innocence. This is different from the role burlesque played historically. In its early days, burlesque was viewed as transgressive and obscene. Respondents claimed to be disillusioned with sexualized images of women in the media and used neo burlesque to culturally expand acceptance of women's physical and sexual diversity. This suggests that they find contemporary images of sexuality, gender, and beauty oppressive, while viewing classic burlesque as embodied with innocence and more positive images of women. Innocence symbolizes what Participant 7 demonstrated in her interview as "an appreciation for simple things, like ankles."

Participants felt empowered by burlesque because of their incorporation of glamour, performance, and art into striptease. Striptease, in the context of stripping, was viewed more negatively by most informants. This is demonstrated by Participant 6's comments on the differences between stripping and burlesque "You're not all stuck out there; you still have some coverage. You're not just out there to put it all out. You're actually performing; you're a performer, not a stripper. It's sexy and glamorous and still has that class in it. You know, it's not all in your face." Participant 6 loves the innocence that burlesque contains. Stripping was generally viewed as hard work where women have to "hustle" and "sell" themselves in order to

make money. Burlesque participants often created their own shows to entertain, rather than focusing on sexual gratification for the audience.

Self-created shows allowed sexual expression to become something more personal and self-directed, and therefore liberating, without the pressures to please an audience for the purposes of affording a living. Sexual expression was mostly represented through feminine striptease. Sometimes it was used for humor, occasionally for political purposes and unlike classic burlesque, new burlesque women no longer had to be the punch line of the comedian's crude sexual humor but decide the direction of their own comedy. However, what performers found liberating was that burlesque was not limited to sexual expression and that these types of expression could be what they created.

Respondent Views of the Difference Between Stripping and Burlesque

BURLESQUE	STRIPPING
Keep every penny	Hustle for tips
Sense of community	Competition for paycheck
Dancing while getting naked	Getting naked and dancing
Focus on performance	Focus on nudity
Battling society standards/expectations	Conforming to societal standards/expectations
Freedom in direction of performance	Less freedom in order to make tips
Performance by choice	Selling yourself
Appreciation of the body	Sexualized violence
Classy/empowering	Focus on sexual

Participants found challenging notions of sexual orientation and gender also liberating or empowering. Some participants identified as "queer" while others were queer friendly. There is more evidence of burlesque performers challenging notions of gender and sexual preference. *BOB*, a performer discussed in Baldwin's *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind,* is a female-female impersonator who wanted to be drag-queen, but was told she couldn't because she is a woman. She parodies herself in shows, which she claims challenges the idea of what it means to be a drag queen (Baldwin 2004:99). In participant observations, gender was most consistently

represented as feminine, but often exaggerated, with wigs, fake eyelashes, and campy, nostalgic costumes that mock conventional femininity. In this sense, dancers are confronting social expectations or norms on a personal and public level through what they wear and what they display to audiences.

Interviewees also challenged accepted body types by striving to include diverse women, with one troupe requiring women size 14 and above. Respondents reported that they found this empowering. Early burlesque was similar in that it defied the Victorian ideal, presenting curvaceous bodies (Heilmann 2000:84). Interviewees prided themselves on expanding cultural acceptance of beauty, which was experienced as empowering.

Essence of Exploitative Experiences

Exploitation was rarely found in interviewees' experiences with burlesque. The reasons for this could be three possible things: they are reluctant to discuss painful personal experiences, they have a false-consciousness of their experience, or they are truly happy with their experiences and have not suffered significant exploitation, but instead only a few negative experiences.

Burlesque dancers, like the women in Sloan and Wahab's (2004) study of topless dancers, expressed awareness of exploitation, especially in their analyses of stripping and the fact that they used burlesque for empowerment. Therefore, it is likely that they have succeeded in finding a way to limit exploitation through the use of creative freedom. Sloan and Wahab assert that it is crucial that we recognized women in sex work as "experts" in their profession (2004:25). Burlesque women too can be viewed as experts in their field, especially since little research has been done in this area. It is important to validate what they think about what they

do, instead of dismissing their perceptions as false consciousness because their experiences are all the evidence that exists.

Sloan and Wahab (2004) also contend that dichotomous thinking about exploitation and liberation has been constraining to research on sex work because it does not capture the complexities of women's lives that are engaged in sexual professions. Similarly, exploitation and liberation cannot account for the full experience of burlesque dancers. Not every positive experience was liberating, but rather, simply encouraging. Nor could negative experiences all be considered exploitative.

Exploitation was most likely when burlesque dancers had the least amount of control over venues, audience, performances, or the troupe itself. Control is the key to understanding how exploitation can happen. Members that had complete control over their troupe or solo act (from performances and production aspects to directing and financing) reported the fewest problems. Those that performed for audiences with similar identities, such as other women, queer, or transgender people, reported feeling the least amount of negative experiences with the audience. Audience can never be completely controlled but it can be predicted with the selection of the venue. To the degree that burlesque dancers experienced exploitation from the audience usually depended on the type of audience drawn to their shows. Derogatory comments from the audience can never be controlled but these were infrequent and not a deterrent to their decision to perform.

Evidence shows that exploitation does occur in the context of patriarchy and because it was experienced, this shows that liberation is limited in patriarchal culture. This supports theories by Dworkin, MacKinnon, and Collins who believe that true liberation can only happen when patriarchy is eliminated. However, the burlesque experience also supports third wave and

pro-sex feminist discourse that propose that liberation can be discovered in sexual expression. Respondents did find burlesque a liberating experience, but it was ultimately bound by exploitative elements they could not control such as audience insults and improper touching, poor management by male producers, and venues that treated them poorly.

DISCUSSION

Neo burlesque could have developed out of elements of Generation X culture, as analyzed by Marinucci (2004) and other third wave feminists. Marinucci (2005) stated that the sort of feminism espoused by the third wave is grounded in Generation X attitudes of lighthearted self-mockery. Burlesque dancers are doing feminist work, yet the majority of them did not identify as feminist, which they saw as excluding of other people besides women, or taking things too seriously. "The Gen X stricture against taking things too seriously applies, not just to others, but to ourselves as well. It is evident in the lighthearted cooptation by third wave feminists of various labels that were seen by many second wave feminists as symbolic of women's oppression. Terms such as girl, bitch, slut, cunt, and queer have entered the standard lexicon of the third wave. In the case of girl, for example, this is because many of us no longer take the label very seriously" (Marinucci 2005:521).

Theories of nostalgia show that new burlesque could have grown out of the trauma experienced in recent times over increasingly sexualized images of women. Many women expressed a desire to change those images and bring back the "innocence" burlesque offers, which differs from the earlier days of classic burlesque when it was considered obscene. This evidence suggests that explicitly sexualized images of women, especially pornographic images in the sense the anti-pornography movement defines it, cause women to feel that female sexuality

has been used in harmful ways. A desire to bring back innocence is indicative of the harm caused by dominant patriarchal symbols of women's sexuality.

Rubin's (1984) radical pluralist sexual theory can be applied to burlesque performance as it accounts for variation in people's sexual experiences and agency, but Dworkin's (1991) and Mackinnon's (1984) theories from the anti-pornography movement can be applied to new burlesque because of the limited liberation experienced by performers. Although participants resisted dominant beauty standards established in patriarchal culture, the context of male supremacy in which burlesque occurs constrains liberation. For example, even though interviewees created shows and troupes that promoted body acceptance and diversity, they sometimes encountered crude, demeaning comments from male audience members, a male producer that took advantage of one troupe and inappropriate touching from another male audience member. This is precisely what constrains their ability to achieve complete liberation. Exploitative elements served to control their challenge to patriarchal culture. This supports anti-pornography premises that liberation is not truly possible under male domination.

Because burlesque has elements of creativity and room for other forms of entertainment, it is more than sexual expression. Choice and control are the foremost factors allowing for this. For instance, performers, especially those who design their entire performance have a choice and full control over what they present, defining how they represent themselves on stage. They can choose to sexually express themselves, perform a variety of styles, or make political and social commentary, or performance art. Performances usually involved choreographed dances borrowed from tap, ballet, swing, and modern dance. Other elements permitting choice and control were the flexible definitions applied to burlesque and structures of troupes. New burlesque does not completely explode gender categories or exploitation. It has the potential for

exploitation and liberation, which is largely dependent on how much creative freedom performers have.

Participants expressed coherent knowledge of inequality and power relations in society, often referring to stripping in this context. Despite living in a patriarchal society, burlesque was still viewed as empowering. None of them considered themselves strippers though most of them expressed that they were supportive of sex work and some were feminists. If interviewees had somehow seemed oblivious to oppression or exploitation, the extent to which burlesque was truly liberating should be questioned. However, since this was not the case it is important to validate the thoughts participants had about their work, rather than dismiss them as ignorant victims of false consciousness.

Excluding themselves from the sex industry served to reinforce notions that burlesque is liberating. Particularly the fact that they did not have to use burlesque as a source of income or have the "perfect" bodies of strippers caused them to feel it was empowering. Separating themselves from sex work established a sense of control over burlesque. For example, reducing stripping to a difficult job with potential exploitation where women are seen as having to work very hard for their income permitted informants to separate themselves from the potential for exploitation. In turn, burlesque could be seen as liberating, the sense that they feel they have control over what they do. This tells us that stripping focuses on client-preference, whereas burlesque is self-preference.

The contexts of burlesque women are similar to those of topless dancers in that each of them comes from a particular demographic that influences the way they feel about their performances. Sloan and Wahab's (2004) research is useful because they demonstrate how important it is to recognize the experiences of women involved in sexual expression and their

contexts for informing feminist discourse. The radical sexual pluralist theory that was advocated by Rubin (1984) was the most fitting in analyzing burlesque. It permits the examination of women's experiences in the realm of the sexual and takes into consideration how they view their activities. Since this theory emphasizes variation, it is vital to understanding burlesque women's experiences. However, third wave feminism can also account for the understanding of burlesque, as it takes on similar characteristics that include promoting the ability for women to enjoy sex work, the search for sexually liberating outlets, and an emphasis on the diversity of experiences.

Besides using theory and secondary research findings, analyzing reported and discovered differences between burlesque and stripping can inform research on how it is different from sex work. The most common response to how burlesque was different from stripping was that strippers depend on their work to make a living, and burlesque dancers perform for fun. In considering whether burlesque would become sex work if they afforded their living or even made profits from performances, burlesque does not fall under the category of sex work because of its flexible definition For example, stripping is clearly defined, performed almost exclusively in venues that focus on sexual expression, and the audience of men. An important distinction is that new burlesque is open for interpretation, therefore not limiting it to any particular realm. Several interviewees claimed that being sexual was only part of burlesque performance, or that it need not be included. Stripping is limited to sexual display of the body. The male fantasy must be satisfied in stripping in order to make money, so in turn it becomes a hustling job, but money is irrelevant in distinguishing burlesque from stripping or other sex work because, as stated, choice of focus is what separates burlesque from sex work. Freedom and control over one's physical body are the elements that demarcate the two.

For this reason, the definition of sex work I have formulated is that it is marked by a limited focus on being sexually expressive in whatever way the work warrants. This is different from Sloan and Wahab's (2004) and Rubin's (1984) definition of sex work, which defines it as compensation for sexual acts. Tipping aspects may vary in burlesque, although no informants in this research were tipped for performances. Burlesque does not fit under the category of sex work even though performers sometimes make money from it. Because it is characterized by a choice in its focus for performances and creative freedom, it is different from sex work. Nevertheless, compensation does not completely define sex work. Sex work requires the use of sexualized performance or expression. Burlesque can move in and out of sexual expression through choice, even being completely personalized self-expression similar to performance art. However, burlesque performance tells us something about the definition of sex work. Sex work cannot be solely defined by compensation for sexual acts. It is also defined by the requirement of sexual expression. Burlesque offers a choice to engage in sexual expression, allowing it to become whatever the performer creates. Even though performers sometimes make money from burlesque, it still cannot be considered sex work because it does not require a sexual focus but can take the form of various types of entertainment or performance art.

Regarding participants' thoughts on feminism, they reported many misconceptions about feminist viewpoints. Many had beliefs that coincided with being a feminist but were either unaware, had a negative view of feminism, or were reluctant to label themselves. Several burlesque performers interviewed are doing feminist work even if they do not identify as feminist. They are taking control over the sexual domination of women and transforming it to suit their personal, sexual, and creative needs.

Neo burlesque can be described as erotic in the sense that Lorde (1978) defined eroticism. Performances were made out of a love for burlesque, including aspects of sensuality, which fits under Lorde's theory that the erotic is a gratifying, powerful, fulfilling experience done out of love. Burlesque women reported feeling empowered doing burlesque, and as Participant 10 said, fulfilled. Feminist researchers can use the erotic elements found in phenomena such as neo burlesque to formulate liberating experiences and for further discovery of how women can establish empowering eroticism. Love, being the means to liberating sexual experiences, comes out of freedom to experience oneself, and this is what defines eroticism (Lorde 1978). Neo burlesque performers, through creative freedom, had liberating experiences, allowing them to love what they do and personalize a form of erotic entertainment that challenges us to rethink sexual expression. Neo burlesque is therefore an example Lorde's idea of eroticism and an illustration of how sexual expression can be transformed to something loving, empowering, and fulfilling.

Future Research and Implications for the Study

A limitation of this study is the lack of racial analysis in both classic and neo burlesque. Little research exists on women of color in classic burlesque, which at one time contained minstrelsy. For the current study, since all interviewees were white, burlesque done by women of color and their experiences would be of great benefit to feminist research on exploitation and liberation. However, as Sloan and Wahab (2004) contend, exploitation and liberation are inadequate in fully theorizing about women's experiences in patriarchal contexts. As demonstrated, burlesque women had experiences both positive and negative not fully related to concepts of exploitation and liberation. A feminist analysis of notions deviating from this dichotomy would add to existing research.

Furthermore, research on body type of burlesque performers would inform us of the extent to which burlesque is truly challenging to social standards for beauty, sexuality, and body type. The perceptions of audiences would be helpful as well, to obtain information on how these messages are received. Also, it would be useful to delve deeper into a racial analysis of the audience during participant observations, which was mostly white.

The theories of this study contend that rethinking what defines sex work would be useful for future studies. Sex work occurs outside the confines of monetary means. For instance, Sloan & Wahab (2004) and Rubin (1984) defined sex work as payment for sexual acts. However, a look at burlesque reveals that sex work is also defined by its limited focus to primarily sexual expression, without choice to depart from that, unlike burlesque. Burlesque performers had a choice to express themselves outside of sexual acts (such as striptease) where at times tap dance, singing, comedy and other performances were employed. This choice gave them control over their performances, something that is not offered in sex work.

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